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Settler Colonialism as a Structure?

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Reason of State Literature in Dutch Colonial Practice: Pieter van Hoorn in Batavia

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What role do intellectual arguments in favour of settler colonialism play in the practice of colonial administrators? During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Europeans not only founded settler colonies, they also wrote theories about the benefits that this specific form of colonialism could bring to a state. I will discuss the example of a colonial administrator whose correspondence shows that he had read this kind of political philosophy extensively and who based practical decisions on this knowledge. The name of this administrator is Pieter van Hoorn, who was a member of the Council of the Indies from 1663 to 1677. The Council of the Indies was an administrative body located in Batavia, the capital of the Dutch East Indies, whose task it was to advise the governor-general.

The Dutch context makes the case more special, because the Dutch Republic did not have large settler communities and was hesitant about promoting them because that would potentially endanger the trade monopoly by the Dutch East India Company. Van Hoorn's voice testifies to a pro-settler discourse that is not often remembered in scholarship. In a letter to the Directors of the East India Company in 1675, he argued for the relative independence of the colony of Batavia, and he did so on the basis of theoretical literature on Roman colonialism and the lessons that modern states should learn from it. The combination of the two gives an insight into the role of reason of state literature in interpreting practical circumstances.

In Settler Colonial Studies (SCS), the primary focus has traditionally been on material factors, such as socio-economic and demographic dynamics, that shape settler colonial structures. This contribution, however, highlights the crucial role of intellectual discourses in the development of settler colonial politics. By examining the influence of ideas, narratives, and ideologies, it reveals how these discourses not only reflected but had the potential to actively drive the establishment and maintenance of settler colonial systems, providing a more comprehensive understanding of their formation and endurance.

The Dutch debate over settler colonialism

Initially, the Dutch East India Company (VOC) had no intention of establishing settler colonies. Throughout the seventeenth century, there were occasional arguments—both from within and outside

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the VOC—that it might be advantageous to create settler communities in the East Indies, modelled after Spanish or Portuguese colonies. Looking at the contemporary Spanish and Portuguese Empires, and frequently also at the Roman Empire, these people argued that Dutch power overseas could not in the long term be maintained only by means of soldiers, a handful of traders and administrators, Chinese middlemen and local people, as the latter two groups could not be trusted and the former were too few. However, such proposals were fundamentally incompatible with the VOC's functioning as a trading company. Holding an exclusive monopoly on trade east of the Cape, the VOC effectively prohibited private initiatives by Dutch citizens, cutting off potential settlers from their most likely source of income. For settler communities to thrive overseas, the trade monopoly would have needed to be relaxed. As a result, arguments in favour of settler colonialism repeatedly clashed with the economic priorities of the VOC and its highly profitable monopoly.

In the first decades of the seventeenth century, some governors-general, such as Jan Pietersz Coen, wrote to Amsterdam asking for colonists, especially women, so that they would be able to maintain a viable Dutch society overseas. Others, such as Hendrik Brouwer, were completely against the idea and thought that soldiers would be better off marrying local women. In general, Dutch women who came to the colony seem to have had no desire to stay for longer than needed to make some money; people like Brouwer had a low opinion of these women and thought that local women would provide a more stable home and healthier children (Taylor 2004, 14).

In the 1640s, the discussion was taken up again by the Board of Directors (Heren XVII). The Directors in Amsterdam then asked the Council of the Indies, the advisory body to the Governor-General in Batavia, for advice on the question of opening up the Company's monopoly on trade: should Dutch citizens in the colonies be allowed to participate in trade, or should this remain the prerogative of the Company? Most members of the Council declared themselves not in favour of this. Some of them would have liked more permanent Dutch settlers, in principle, but they were convinced that this was not feasible in practice, even if the trading monopoly was not continued. This mostly had to do with the kind of Dutch people who were willing to go to the colonies: these poor and uneducated people were not seen as trustworthy settlers.

Only one member of the council, Johan Maetsuycker, advised in favour of settlers. In his lengthy advice, he first summarised all the arguments of the opponents: that settlers would be made up of the worst elements in society, that they would not be loyal, that they would not be able to make a living, and that they would return home as soon as they had made some money. Although Maetsuycker agreed with these arguments to a certain extent, he did think it possible to create a thriving settler colony under the right conditions. If the colony has a good government and upright laws, immoral people can be turned into good citizens. In order to make loyal citizens out of these poor migrants, however, you

have to make some concessions and trust them with a part of the trade that is now monopolised by the Company.

The directors in Amsterdam did not follow Maetsuycker's advice, but the advice of the majority to keep the trade monopoly and not to allow settler colonialism. They took the definite decision in 1652 and after that, the discussion seems to have died down until the 1660s. In the meantime, Johan Maetsuyker became governor-general, a position he held for 25 years until his death in 1678. During the 1660s, tentative steps were taken to create a positive climate for Dutch settlers: the foundation of a Latin school, the partial opening up of the trade monopoly, and the allowance for more migrants from the Republic to travel to the colony. However, after the disastrous year of 1672, when the Republic was attacked by almost all its neighbours, the whole situation changed. The Republic was at war and struggling, could not import as much and pay as much, and the Company was no longer making a profit. They blamed this on the opening up of trade and imposed a very strict trade monopoly again.

Johan Maetsuyker and the other members of the Council of the Indies did not agree, and Pieter van Hoorn, one of the members of the Council, wrote a letter to Amsterdam in which he took the pro-settler stance much further than Maetsuyker had done 25 years earlier. He argued that a colony could only flourish if it was largely independent of the metropole. Especially in the crucial early stages, it should not be burdened by taxes or trade restrictions, and it should not be guided by the self-centred, profit-driven considerations of others, but led by a local council that has the colony's own best interests at heart. The Company consistently acted against the interests of Batavia, not only by enforcing the trade monopoly, but also by prioritising new conquests and involvement in local military conflicts over the sustainable expansion of agriculture around Batavia.

Not unexpectedly, this letter was not well received in Amsterdam. Instead of listening to Maetsuyker and Van Hoorn, the board of directors listened to the advice of Rijcklof van Goens, another member of the Council of the Indies who was to succeed Maetsuyker as governor-general. Van Goens had a completely different view of Batavia, and was very much in favour of enforcing the trade monopoly coupled with military expansion. In 1677, five older members of the Council of the Indies, including Pieter van Hoorn, were dismissed. These were probably the ones in favour of more independence for the local community. Despite these setbacks, in 1678 the son of van Hoorn, Johan van Hoorn, as the new governor-general, began to colonise the area around Batavia, bringing in surveyors to draw up maps of ownership.

Settler colonialism as a secret to success

Although his proposal was not accepted, a closer look at the arguments presented in Van Hoorn's letter is interesting because it makes extensive use of what is known as reason of state literature. This genre was developed from the end of the sixteenth century by authors such as Nicolo Machiavelli, Giovanni Botero, Jean Bodin, Justus Lipsius and Arnold Clapmar. Their idea was that the survival and the success of states must be underpinned by empirically proven principles. So these authors delved into history in search of the secrets of the rise and fall of states and empires, the so-called *arcana imperii*. One of these secrets was settler colonialism. Van Hoorn's advice refers to all the major discussions of colonisation as a secret of empire that were available at the time.

First, it draws on the work of Carlo Sigonio. This sixteenth-century Italian humanist had analysed the socio-political history of the Roman Republic and its spread in Italy in his *works De antiquo iure civium Romanorum* (1560) and *De antiquo iure Italiae* (1560) (McCuaig 1989). He was the first to stress that the Roman colonies had advantages other than military ones, stating that the establishment of colonies and the distribution of land served as a remedy for overpopulation and social conflict in Rome (Pelgrom and Weststeijn 2020). Van Hoorn mentions both types of benefits.

Second, to the classical distinction between colonies founded by a free group of refugees and colonies founded by people sent out by a state (as it is found for instance in the commentary of Servius on Vergil's *Aeneid* 1.12), van Hoorn adds a further distinction within the second type of colony, namely between colonies founded in the country itself by people born there, or by foreigners in distant countries. The first category seems to refer to the colonisation of either wastelands or neighbouring territories. Van Hoorn has an interesting way of expressing this distinction. He says that "a colony under another's rule is founded and extended in the same country and under the same jurisdiction and rule where the mother of the colony resides and rules; or a colony is founded and extended outside a country, jurisdiction and rule of the mother of the colony and where the mother does not reside" (de Jonge 1872, 131). This seems to imply that overseas colonies are not under the jurisdiction and government of the metropole. Read in the context of Dutch colonisation, this makes sense, because the East India Company was essentially a commercial enterprise, albeit one that could exercise state power in some respects, such as waging war and negotiating treaties. The Dutch Empire saw itself as a maritime empire, and as Hugo Grotius had said, no one can claim dominium or imperium over the seas. As a general statement about overseas colonies, however, it sounds strange to say that a colony overseas falls outside the jurisdiction and rule of the metropole.

Van Hoorn continues by saying that a colony that is not free, because it is founded on the orders of a republic or monarchy, will never flourish as long as it is expected to serve the interests of the metropole and not its own. This can be read in the context of the next few paragraphs of the letter, where

van Hoorn gives a list of twenty characteristics of successful colonies. This list is almost entirely taken from Francis Bacon's essay *Of Plantations*, although van Hoorn does not make the attribution explicit. The Latin translation of Bacon's collection of essays, *Sermones Fideles Sive Interiora Rerum* had been printed in 1638 and again in 1641 in Leiden. With Bacon, van Hoorn argues that a colony is like a tree: when you plant it, you should give it time to grow and not expect to reap the fruits of your labour for at least twenty years. Therefore, it is absolutely detrimental to leave the care of a colony in the hands of merchants who think only of short-term profits. In the early years of a colony, it should not be expected to pay taxes and should be allowed to establish itself through free trade. It should not get involved in local conflicts and conquests, but should concentrate on itself first. Also, the colony should not depend on too large a council in the metropole, but on a small number of people, as this makes its government more effective.

All of these points, first made by Francis Bacon, are very fitting to the case van Hoorn wishes to make. He analyses the stunted growth of Batavia as the result of mismanagement by a commercial enterprise that thinks only in terms of profit. It attracts idlers and adventurers, and whenever it has built up a semblance of a stable population, people are sent elsewhere to new colonies. It does not develop outside the city walls, where the farmland is a constant target for raiders. And worst of all, it is burdened with military expeditions and new conquests that it cannot possibly sustain, so its very existence is constantly threatened. His advice was specifically directed against the plans of another member of the Council of the Indies, Rijckloff van Goens, who had recently conquered Ceylon and proposed to make it the capital of the Dutch East Indies instead of Batavia. Van Hoorn protested against this new conquest and warned of imperial overstretch, as the funds that would be used to defend the new conquests would not be used to expand the existing settler colony. He strongly protested against the idea that a settler colony could simply be abandoned and rebuilt elsewhere. With Bacon, he says that a settler colony should never be uprooted and abandoned.

Subsequently, van Hoorn also refers to Machiavelli by saying that a republic should periodically purify itself by returning to its first principles (de Jonge 1872, 141; Weststeijn 2014, 26). In the case of Batavia, this would mean returning it to the condition of a military bulwark and trading post. Van Hoorn would see this as relief from the heavy responsibilities over conquered territories that Batavia now bears. However, he also says that the colony has now progressed too far. Batavia has long since become a colony, and the difference between a conquest and a colony is that you can abandon the former, but not the latter. So the Company now has a responsibility to let Batavia develop itself into a thriving colony, which means that its citizens must be able to participate in trade and manage their own affairs, with an eye to the long-term welfare of the community.

Finally, van Hoorn refers to a statement by Velleius Paterculus, a Roman historian from the first century AD. Van Hoorn calls him 'Paberculus', suggesting that he was not familiar with the full text but may have read about it in a discussion on Roman colonialism. Paterculus claimed that the Romans made a mistake when they first established colonies outside of Italy. He said that they had always avoided doing so before, because they had seen how Greek and Phoenician colonies could become more powerful than their founding city. Van Hoorn quotes this but notes that it is probably too late for this particular secret of empire. Basing himself on reason of state literature, he is convinced that an empire needs to work on coherence before it can expand further. In this way, he can argue that Batavia must first be consolidated as the capital colony of Dutch trade in the East Indies, before the capital is moved to new locations or new colonies are founded.

Insights in settler colonialism

The central argument of settler colonial studies is that settler colonialism has its own dynamic, different from colonialism without large settler communities. Van Hoorn's letter to the Directors of the East India Company in Amsterdam shows not only that he derives this same insight from his reading of reason of state literature, but that it is an insight that shapes his understanding of the Dutch colonies and the course that the Company should take.

Van Hoorn does not say that settler colonisation is a superior way of building an empire. He admits that the Dutch Republic could have chosen to build their colonial empire solely on trading posts and conquests - although this might be a rhetorical strategy. However, a settler colony is different from a trading post or fortress. It is a community that must be able to develop itself. Once you have established a settler colony, you need a different colonial strategy, which includes not only commercial and military interests, but also a plan for the population of the colony. This introduces a completely new perspective into the Dutch debate on the advantages of settler colonialism. All other proponents of settler colonialism envision that settlers will best serve the commercial or political interests of the metropolis. This might also be van Hoorn's final aim, but he also strongly advocates for the relative political autonomy and self-determination of the colony. Copying Francis Bacon, van Hoorn states that it is a moral duty never to abandon a settler colony, even if it should never have been started in the first place! This seems significant in the light of settler colonial studies because it creates a teleology for the colony that is separate from the interests of the metropolis. The founding of a colony then sets in motion a process of land division and expansion that should not be halted or impeded.

In the context of Batavia, however, this theory clashed not only with the commercial interests of the East India Company, but also with practical limitations. Although van Hoorn emphasised

agriculture and expansion around the colony of Batavia, he knew that such large-scale migration was highly unlikely. It was difficult to even find people in the homeland who were willing to migrate (Klooster 2016, 189–98), and when van Hoorn's son eventually began to cultivate the surrounding lands, he worked mostly with the existing Chinese middle class, not with Dutch settlers (Blussé, 2023).

Nevertheless, I find it significant that we encounter this kind of ideological argument, rooted in political philosophy and classical knowledge, in a letter written by a Dutch colonial administrator to the VOC. First, even in the seventeenth century, the Dutch preferred to speak about their colonial project in commercial and practical terms; overtly ideological and political discourses are more rare (Raben 2013). We see this in the debate about settler colonialism: the debate revolves less about the reasons why one would or should send settlers overseas than about how these settlers can make a living without commercially competing with the VOC. Second, although the Dutch had a few minor settler colonies, they did not practice settler colonialism on a large scale during this time. Even so, we find a colonial administrator in Batavia who not only defended his colony as an autonomous political unity with its own teleology, but who was willing to call upon all the reason of state literature that was available to make his case. This demonstrates both how quickly settler communities began to agitate against the idea of servility to the metropole, but also how fundamental the role of ideology and classical knowledge could be.

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