

What's Done ... Can Be Undone!

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Omission

The Hague takes the lead when it comes to memorial statuary in the Netherlands. Most of these monuments were erected in honour of important historical figures. The majority were statesmen, ranging from Count William II of Holland (1228-1256) to former Dutch Prime Minister Willem Drees (1886-1988). These historic figures are emblematic of the Netherlands we live in today: a model state of freedom and democracy. But it is striking that the founder of modern democratic government, Johan Rudolf Thorbecke (1798-1872), is absent from the succession. Thorbecke was the chairman of the Constitutional Committee, which in 1848 was charged by King William II, alarmed at the political upheavals elsewhere in Europe, with the task of formulating a new constitution. In a speech the king stated: 'I have considered it better to give the impression to allow voluntarily that which later I might have been forced to concede.' The new constitution revoked the king's absolute power and the Netherlands became a constitutional monarchy in which power lies with the parliament. The results included direct elections and an extension of parliamentary rights. Ministerial responsibility and a provision for the dissolution of parliament were also introduced. The new constitution was proclaimed on 3 November 1848, and it propelled the country's transformation into today's modern democratic state.

Thorbecke in Amsterdam

Shortly after Thorbecke's death, appeals arose in various political quarters for a monument to be erected in his memory. The statue was intended for a site in The Hague. Indeed, Thorbecke was a politician, founder of our parliamentary system, and architect of the 1848 Constitution. Most of his life he had lived and worked in The Hague. But there was a fundamental disagreement and strife in the municipal council of The Hague, which the writer Vosmaer described as 'little feuds, grocers' arguments, nonsensical reasonings.' From behind the scenes, the conservative minister J. Heemskerck exerted his influence, as he saw no need for a tribute to the liberal frontman. Euphemistically speaking, the conservatives were not entirely pleased with Thorbecke's reforms. To overcome the deadlock, the statue was brought to Amsterdam, where it was placed on the Reguliersplein, which was renamed Thorbeckeplein after the statue was unveiled there on 20 May 1876. That seemed to be the end of the matter, and, in the century that has passed since, nobody voiced concern about whether the statue is located in the right city. However, it is a historical mistake to commemorate Thorbecke's constitution in Amsterdam. A monument to Thorbecke belongs in The Hague; so much is beyond doubt.

Thorbecke in The Hague

It is no coincidence that in The Hague today, 160 years after the introduction of parliamentary democracy, there has been an initiative to erect a Thorbecke monument. After all the intervening years, parliamentary democracy is threatened by parliament itself. Never before have politicians been so susceptible to the wishes of the electorate that parliamentary populism threatens to undermine Thorbecke's parliamentary system. Politicians are no longer ideological visionaries, but have become electoral wheeler-dealers who parrot the language of the street in an effort to win favour from a frustrated and disgruntled society. Who but Thorbecke can bring the Netherlands' public representatives back into line? Who but Thorbecke can reinforce the idea that parliament is meant to represent the people and the other way round? Who is better equipped to defend the constitution than its very originator?

But at the same time the question arises whether a monument focusing on Thorbecke's thought can supplement the lack in the monument collection of The Hague. How is that monument supposed to relate to the present when it also wants to take the past into account? Is it supposed to be a posthumous salute to a politician who died nearly 140 years ago, or a living interpretation of his intellectual heritage? And in case of the latter, which elements should be stressed? And would a

contemporary approach to Thorbecke's intellectual heritage still relate to Thorbecke as a person? Throughout time, Thorbecke's liberalism has repeatedly undergone changes, and any contemporary exegesis of freedom and democracy relating to Thorbecke's original thought cannot be but arbitrary.

Spinoza in Amsterdam

However, the historical blunder by the municipal of The Hague, refusing the Thorbecke monument in 1876, also offers a possible solution. In fact, there is in Amsterdam a situation similar to the one in The Hague, concerning the most famous and radical Dutch philosopher, Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677). This Jewish Amsterdammer, who was later banished from the city where he was born, doesn't have a monument in Amsterdam, whereas he has one in The Hague. As a secularist, Spinoza was a passionate advocate of freedom of speech and religion. He argued that there are no God-given laws, and that religion is a work of mankind. He placed human intellect above faith and appealed to the human capacity for love and justice. The latter are precisely the qualities which Amsterdam is so keen to recover. A monument to Spinoza belongs in Amsterdam; so much is beyond doubt.

Thorbecke's ability to call the forces of democracy to order is matched by Spinoza in his potential to revive respect for freedom of thought. At the same time as The Hague remembered Thorbecke, Amsterdam is contemplating the conditions for a new monument. Even though the underlying discrepancies have been noticed, two monuments have been thought up, for convenience's sake: for the man in the street a bronze Spinoza statue, a mere resemblance devoid of any intellectual content, and for the art lover an artistic location with all kinds of activities in a Spinozist vein. So form without content plus content without form. The something-for-everyone approach Amsterdam has taken towards branding itself as the Spinoza city is absurd: two monuments are required because one alone cannot fulfil the purpose.

Monument exchange

Four years after The Hague refused to erect a statue of Thorbecke, in 1880, again after years of political squabbling, due to his views which many considered subversive and atheist, the Spinoza monument was unveiled.¹ Spinoza had lived in The Hague for eight years and has died there. Coincidentally, Thorbecke lived for eight years in Amsterdam. These merely formal facts tie them to their current locations. Spinoza has been placed, with difficulty, close to the house where he died, Thorbecke's statue in Amsterdam has a better location, perhaps, but he faces the wrong way with his back to his square. He has turned his back indignantly on his colleague Rembrandt, whose statue, only a few metres away, has recently been accompanied by a complete Night Watch in bronze.

What's done...

... is done, as the saying goes; but perhaps not in this case. The national heroes of freedom and democracy have to stand in their historical context, on the location from which their meaning expressed best. Thorbecke belongs in The Hague and Spinoza in Amsterdam. A just placement for these monuments honours their meaning. Both their histories make a reasonable case for their exchange. By exchanging the monuments for Spinoza and Thorbecke, The Hague and Amsterdam will be able to spotlight their heritage down to the minutest detail.

Redressing historical and political blunders in the commemoration of these two great Dutchmen would help place them in a contemporary light. Moving these authentic nineteenth century monument attaches their meaning to the current events, without harming their historical appearance in public. The new locations of their memorials actualize the intellectual legacies of Thorbecke and Spinoza, accepting them as they are.

Effect

The actual implementation of this exchange would itself amount to a contemporary work of art without parallel; exchanging memorials is an unknown phenomenon. Just like when they were unveiled in 1876 and 1880, their exchange will cause much uproar. Thorbecke's and Spinoza's intellectual heritage and their contemporary meaning for The Hague and Amsterdam will be expounded in many different ways, which clearly shows the forces surrounding these monuments. If the current initiatives in The Hague and Amsterdam are aiming to deploy Thorbecke and Spinoza in the

discussion in society about freedom and democracy, the exchange of their monuments will automatically lead to a substantive debate. Thus it satisfies, in a contemporary way, the desire to bring national history to life. It brings history to life, which unmistakably and genuinely will contribute to the current popular quest for national identity.

Notes

1. The monumental statue of Johan Rudolf Thorbecke, unveiled in Amsterdam in 1876, was made by Ferdinand Leenhoff (1841-1914). The monumental statue of Baruch Spinoza, unveiled in The Hague in 1880, was made by Frédéric Hexamer (1847-1924).