Wantje Fritschy, *Public Finance of the Dutch Republic in Comparative Perspective: The Viability of an Early Modern Federal State (1570s-1795)*, Brill, Leiden, 2017, pp. xvii-429

The book is one of the most outstanding results of a long sequence of research that has seen the publication of important works and fundamental datasets on the Dutch public finance during the ancien regime. The subject has been particularly studied in recent years: Marjolein ‘t Hart has focused on the process of state building and recently offered a stimulating book on the war against the Habsburg monarchy; Oscar Gelderblom and Joost Jonker have examined some aspects of the financial market and highlighted innovations performed in Holland; Jaco Zuijderdein has looked for the medieval roots of James Tracy’s ‘Financial revolution’ in the second half of the sixteenth century; several other works have dealt with local finance. In short, Ducth public finance has become much less unexplored than it was only a few decades ago.

Fritschy’s book does, however, not limit itself to provide a synthesis of such research, but offers new perspectives and interpretations by relying on a large quantitative dataset. The comparative approach highlights both specific features of the Dutch financial and fiscal system and differences with regard to other states.

Chapter one deals with the early phase of the war of independence. The protagonist of those years, prince William of Orange, funded the army by mortgaging his personal assets. At the same time, however, he was allowed by cities to exploit new fiscal resources at provincial level. The emergence of the effective provincial tax systems paved the way to build an efficient fiscal system that in turn triggered a ‘financial revolution’ by the early seventeenth century (chapter two). So, a tax revolution made of new taxes and forced loans, which significantly increased the burden on Dutch taxpayers, represented the premise for the formation of a lively financial market, based on long-term loans at moderate interest rates, which supported the war effort of the Netherlands. This process, however, turned out to be quite slow and hard, so that the Spaniards and Dutch alike welcomed the truce of 1609 to their great relief.

Chapter three analyses the two centuries following the Truce. War expenditure characterized the seventeenth century, while the following century witnessed a significant decline in military needs. The gigantic effort of warfare was supported by both heavy taxation (possibly the highest one in seventeenth-century Europe) and financial capital raised through public debt. It is noteworthy that the decrease of the provincial interest burdens was mainly due to the huge capital supply from the cities. Furthermore, short-term loans (*obligatie*), which were bearer bonds issued by each province and could be more easily transferred than annuities, were transformed into long-term debts being frequently rolled over. This mechanism, based on the central role as tax gatherers of provinces (especially Holland) and cooperative cities was the key factor that contributed to the rise of the country as a great power in seventeenth-century Europe. The following century witnessed a change in the international theatre. England and France were able to exploit financial and military resources that the United Provinces could not match. The cooperative environment, furthermore, was deteriorating, for the heavy tax burden on the lower classes brought about increasingly discontent, so that the Patriots’ Revolt was the outcome of long-lasting difficulties.

The second part of the book compares the Dutch case with those of the republic of Venice, the Ottoman Empire and Britain. As far as the Venetian state is concerned, Fritschy points out that the centralised capital-based structure prevented from reproducing the Dutch model, i.e. the formation of a relatively large public debt. The comparison with England shows that the absence of a dense urban network, as was instead the case in the United Provinces, limited the Crown in obtaining loans. It could be argued that London could have played the same role as Holland, as a dynamic element that also involved the rest of the country. The comparison with the Ottoman Empire appears more problematic, since the size and structure of this state itself are completely different. The prevailing agrarian economic base and the light financial system represent important differences with respect to the United Provinces. The crucial element, however, laid in the different urbanization trajectories; while in the West population growth led to an increase in urbanization and specialization, in the Ottoman territories there were few large centres in very large areas. Accordingly, the tax and financial resources at disposal of the Sultan were much more limited than in Western Europe. Truly, although this image is widely shared by scholars, it would nevertheless have been be useful to consider the Ottoman state as a composite state, with its attached political and institutional constraints. Maybe a touch of politics, namely how vested interests influenced the fiscal choices of the various governments, would have made the book here reviewed even more fascinating (if I may use this term for financial history).

The book is a splendid example of the passion of a scholar who has spent many years in researching and thinking. I'm sure Wantje is putting the same passion into his recent field of interest, the Egyptian hieroglyphs. We look forward to reading her next work.

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