

‘Dutch Accounting Practices and the Cultural Origins of Political Economy in Europe 1600-1730’

Jacob Soll

This paper fits into Soll's wider project to write histories of the birth of information culture in the European tradition through an interdisciplinary approach, mixing the histories of science, finance, libraries and politics.

Here he charts the entrance of a Dutch language of managerial policy and political economy into political discourse in states across mid-seventeenth century Europe. The crises of the 1650s and 1660s threw the limitations of contemporary ideas of government and statecraft into sharp relief; ‘reason of state’ in its Machiavellian or Tacitist form was inadequate when confronted by the escalating demands of the large scale, administrative, military, industrial, colonial state. It was in Holland that accounting practices, the inventory book and double-entry bookkeeping were first placed at the centre of new state administration. The result was a departure from a late feudal *fiscalité* of non-strategic taxation for war and the spread of the *tools* of accounting and financial policy across Europe.

Although the mercantile republic of Holland was singularly responsible for such developments, the rise of the language of political economy did not dictate a triumph for republicanism or laissez-faire theory. There certainly was a Dutch brand of argument for Republican government, in which the connection was made between free government and information, good accounting and trade and religious tolerance but the developments in political economy could be and were appropriated by entrenched monarchical states. Consequently financial managers, though not prolific in noble circles before the crises of the 1650s and 1660s, grew in standing and influence in Europe’s monarchical states; court culture shifted from an ignorance of bookkeepers’ practices to one where the *ars mercatoria* proliferated. An agent of this change was the princely curriculum, and the novel emphasis that political economy was to be considered the preserve of the monarch. Soll demonstrates that the Dutch model became a template for the curriculum taught to other European monarchs. Behind this development lies the central paradox, highlighted by Soll, that these monarchies remained militarily opposed to Holland whilst actively borrowing from their discourse of political economy.

This paper gives a new context to the story of the rise of the concept of public state accountability at the end of the seventeenth century, the idea that without public supervision ministers would only serve their own interests, and state debt would explode. The texts offering these critiques have long been read for their Machiavellian discussion of public political virtue and corruption. Soll’s paper illustrates that though state financial accountability certainly has deep roots in these Tacitean and Machiavellian discussions, it also derived from the growing culture of accounting that grew in mid-seventeenth century Holland.

Biography:

Jacob Soll received his Diplôme d'Études Approfondies from the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in Paris in 1993 and his Ph.D. from Magdalene College, Cambridge, UK in 1998. From 1997-9 he was a Visiting Lecturer in the Department of History at Princeton University. Since 2005 he has been an Associate Professor in the Department of History at Rutgers University and he is a Guggenheim fellow for 2009.

Soll's work focuses on the social and cultural history of politics and information: a specialty that builds on political, intellectual, and economic history, the history of books, libraries, education and information. It has sought to understand how changing attitudes toward knowledge and information affected state building and political subversion on a pan-European scale between 1370 and 1815, using France and Italy as points of reference.

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http://surveys.rutgers.edu/facsurv/html/Jacob_Soll.html