

The Rhetoric of a *Mercator Sapiens*

The Representation of an Emerging Capitalist Society
in the Political Thought of the Brothers De la Court

outline paper Arthur Weststeijn (EUI)

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This paper brings us to the 17th century Dutch Republic, which has been labelled as a typical bourgeois society and as the first modern economy.¹ It deals with the self-representation of this emerging capitalist world by focusing on the writings of two Dutch merchants alias theorists, the brothers Johan and Pieter de la Court, who, publishing a number of treatises in the 1660s, combined their commercial practices in the Dutch textile business with a commercial theorizing about the ideal republican state and virtuous human behaviour. The paper concentrates on the way in which the De la Courts presented their works to their audience and justified their intellectual and commercial endeavour, and thus it tackles the issue of the *rhetoric* of the brothers' writings.

This rhetoric can be characterized as the rhetoric of the *mercator sapiens*, the wise merchant who engages in virtuous commerce and honest speech. This term was coined by the Dutch humanist Caspar Barlaeus in a famous oration he gave at the opening of the Amsterdam 'Athenaeum Illustre' in 1632: speaking to an audience of merchants and academics alike, Barlaeus pleaded for the necessary combination of mercantile capabilities, such as honesty and frugality, with wisdom and eloquence as essential features of civic education.² In his speech, Barlaeus stressed that Mercury had been the Ancient God not only of commerce, but also of wisdom and rhetoric. The question underlying this paper is how these two faces of Mercury reappear in the theory of the brothers De la Court.

Firstly, the paper addresses the way in which the tradition of late humanist rhetoric surfaced within the brothers' writings. As the standard 17th century rhetorical textbook by the Dutch scholar Gerard Vossius emphasized, every oration or text should establish an intrinsic relation between its *logos* (i.e. the argumentation), its *ethos* (i.e. the establishment of a positive

¹ See e.g. Simon Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches. An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age* (New York: Knopf, 1987); Willem Frijhoff et al., *1650. Hard-Won Unity* (Basingstoke etc.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); and Jan de Vries and Adriaan van der Woude, *The First Modern Economy: Success, Failure, and Perseverance of the Dutch Economy, 1500-1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

² A modern edition of the original Latin with a Dutch translation can be found in Caspar Barlaeus, *Mercator sapiens. Oratie gehouden bij de innijding van de Illustere School te Amsterdam op 9 januari 1632*, ed. S. van der Woude (Amsterdam: Universiteitsbibliotheek, 1967).

‘image’ of the author), and *pathos*, the arousal of passions among the audience.³ On the basis of a number of examples, I will show how the De la Courts dealt with this threefold rhetorical device. Thus, they tried to play upon the emotions and expectations of their contemporary audience by posing suggestive rhetorical questions and incorporating telling, emblematic fables within their theory, fables which evidently appealed to the senses of a bourgeois population engaged in self-interested business and trade. Furthermore, the brothers presented themselves as reliable, trustworthy guides through the labyrinth of politics, unconditioned by the humbug of the fruits of academic pens, those

*‘Latin books, displaying high-flown Titles such as Politica, Systema Politicum, Doctrina Civilis, Prudentia Politica, de Republica, Arcana Rerumpublicarum, Aphorismi Politici, Axiomata Politica, etcetera, written by some German Professors, Doctors, Preachers, and Schoolmasters [that should be judged as] Pedantically cowardly, tasteless, scholastic, full of ignorance and of wrong or harmful and seditious Opinions; so that all those German writers seem to have practised their judgment nowhere less, than in matters of State’.*⁴

Secondly, the paper argues that the work of the brothers, though following rhetorical standards to some extent, involved a departure from tradition in its reaction against the intrinsic ambiguity of evaluative discourse as emphasized by humanist culture.⁵ Whereas the brothers present themselves as impartial seekers of truth, they arraign others who jeopardize an objective assessment of good and evil, such as the hypocrite ‘*Courtesans*’ who indulge ‘impudently in their sycophancies’ at the royal courts. In an endless competition among courtiers to please the king, these courtiers

‘change his *vices* into virtues ... as when one calls *lavishness* generosity, *excess* royalty, *drunkenness* cheerfulness, *whoring* love, *haughtiness* respectability, *cruelness* justice, *thievery* swiftiness, *cursing* openheartedness, *blabbing* eloquence, *dissimulation* political, or worldly-wisdom, and the *poltroonery* or *pusillanimity* common to *Grandeess*, prudence.’⁶

³ Gerardus Vossius, *Rhetorices contractae, sive partitionum oratoriarum libri V* (Oxford, 1651), I.II.5, p. 18 and passim.

⁴ [Johan and Pieter de la Court], *Politike Discoursen, handelende in Ses onderscheide Boeken van Steeden, Landen, Oorlogen, Kerken, Regeeringen en Zeeden* (Amsterdam, 1662), ‘Voor-Reeden, Aen den Leeser’ [translated from the Dutch].

⁵ Cf. Quentin Skinner, *Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 172-180 and 279-284.

⁶ *Politike Discoursen*: II, 236.

The De la Courts vehemently repudiate this dissimulative language of courtiers along with the passionate demagoguery of clerics that was typical for monarchical states such as the French one. Instead, they propose a plain and honest form of speech that enables a free, open debate among all members of society. As one of the brothers presents himself to his readers:

‘I am no foreign and slavish *Courtier* who does not care for the Country’s welfare and who is used to be silent or to speak whenever the Monarch or Prince pleases so ... I am a born, rounded *Hollander* who is used calling *Scapham Scapham*, a boat a boat, and who straightforwardly steadies its helm.’⁷

This kind of speech can be compared with what in Ancient Greece was called *parrhèsia*, which is also a central element in Foucault’s philosophy of language and power. Following some remarks made by Foucault, I will argue that it is a form of speech which may be characterized as a typical element of a mercantile society where honesty and straightforwardness are seen as key virtues. Thus, it is the rhetoric of the market, and Mercury’s two faces meet.

In conclusion, then, the paper discusses the statement of the De la Courts that this rhetoric of the market, only achievable in free republics, enables an objective, rational assessment of the common good, and thus constructs a society in which everyone is master over himself:

‘A *State* where no *Man* can dictate but where the utmost is to appear in a certain *assembly* to give one’s vote, so that a conclusion is made according to its majority, on the strength of which all *order* and laws are made, and all Magistrates are chosen to execute the order and laws mentioned. Which *State* the Greeks and Latins have called *liberty*: since *no one there is bound to live according to the will and spirit of one man ... but to the spirit of order and law*, to which all Residents of that State are uniformly subjected, as they are to Reason ... and therefore, no one in such a *State* is a *Lord*, and no one a *Slave*; indeed, hardly can one call one of the residents in such a country a *subject*, since they are subjected to no man at all.’⁸

In such a individualized world, every citizen will be independent and left free to accumulate his goods and indulge in profit in peace. This is the conscious self-representation of the modern capitalist world, still with us today.

⁷ [Pieter de la Court], *Aannysing der heilsame politieke Gronden en Maximen van de Republike van Holland en West-Vriesland* (Leiden and Rotterdam, 1669), ‘Voor-reeden des aucteurs’.

⁸ [Johan and Pieter de la Court], *Consideratien van Staat, ofte Politieke Weeg-schaal* (Amsterdam, 1662), 311-312.