

Geert J. Somsen *

Committing to internationalism: Mediating activities of Dutch scientists, 1900–1950

ONE OF THE BEST-KNOWN FORMS of political engagement of scientists is their internationalism. Scientists, it has often been said, form a global community, dedicated to a universal pursuit, and hence they rise above the divisions and possible conflicts of empires and nations. Their altruistic cooperation can be taken as a model of peaceful conduct in international affairs generally. Countries fight, but “the sciences”, Edward Jenner said and many have repeated after him, “were never at war.”¹

The idea of scientific internationalism has been so often expressed and for such a long time that it almost appears to be a general characteristic of science and not a particular political stance at all. It has even been claimed that science is *by nature* international,² implying that scientists’ internationalism is not a matter of choice but an inevitable consequence of what they do. In this paper I want to argue the contrary. My aim is to show that: A) expressions of internationalism in science were the result of *deliberate* choices to engage in political affairs, often in ways that were by no means uncontroversial; and B) the ideological meaning of internationalism has changed following the particular circumstances that it was expressed in. Internationalism, in other words, is not a standard fixture of science, but a label for various forms of strong political engagement.

I want to illustrate these theses by looking at internationalist activities of *Dutch* scientists from the beginning of the 20th century to the Second World War. During this period, Dutch scientists were exceptionally active in advancing international scientific cooperation and in relating it to the cause of world peace. Most famous is the mediating work in the 1920s, by the physicist Hendrik Antoon Lorentz, and also his colleagues chemist Ernst Cohen, biologist F.A.F.C. Went and astronomer Willem de Sitter. Representing a neutral country, these scientists energetically tried to reunite the international scientific community that had become bitterly divided in Central and Allied camps during the First World War. These efforts are well-known and well-documented, and I will briefly allude to them, but concentrate on related activities by others, right before and directly after World War I and its aftermath.

One of the first and most ambitious Dutchmen to be actively promoting internationalism in science was the wealthy physician Pieter Eijkman, author of *l’Internationalisme Médical* (1910), *l’Internationalisme Scientifique* (1911), as well as the short-lived journal *Review of Internationalism* (1907), which also appeared in French, German and Dutch.³ Eijkman believed that international cooperation of scientists strongly stimulated world peace, and that his own country could play an important role in advancing this kind of science-based pacifism. From 1905 to 1912 he promoted the idea that the city of The Hague should become the seat of an “Intellectual World-Center”, a “World Capital” that would host the most important international scientific organizations. He commissioned the well-known architect Karel de Bazel to create a design, and his “Bureau for Internationalism” developed elaborate plans on how this capital should be financed and organized. The capital (which, to be sure, was never realized) was planned to be built in the dunes bordering the North Sea, centering around a Monument for International

* Department of History, Maastricht University, Maastricht, The Netherlands; email: g.somsen@history.unimaas.nl, homepage: <http://www.fdcw.unimaas.nl/staff/somsen>.

¹ Most famously by Sir Gavin de Beer, *The Sciences were Never at War* (London 1960), documenting the correspondence of Joseph banks and the *Institut* on South Sea passages.

² Brigitte Schroeder-Gudehus, “Nationalism and Internationalism” in: R.C. Olby *et al.* (eds), *Companion to the History of Modern Science* (London: Nelson and New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 909-919.

³ Pieter Eijkman was born in 1862 and died in May 1914, so months before World War I. Incidentally, his brother was Christiaan Eijkman (1858-1930), who received the 1929 Nobel prize for physiology and medicine, together with Frederick Gowland Hopkins, “for his discovery of the antineuritic vitamin”.

Brotherhood, and hosting three international academies: for anthropology, for arts, and for pedagogy, hygiene and economics. It would also include a workers' garden-city that could be used for sociological fieldwork. Later on, the International Association of Academies was to add its headquarters as well.

Eijkman and his collaborators generated a lot of publicity. The Dutch press welcomed his "Athens of the future",⁴ the British journalist and pacifist William Stead lend his enthusiastic support,⁵ and a host of European scientists and artists granted their signatures of approval. Most of all, Eijkman managed to get an interview with Andrew Carnegie, the American steel tycoon and peace philanthropist, whom he had always had in mind as the best-suited sponsor. However, when Carnegie learned that there was no official support by the Dutch government, he quickly lost his interest and refused to contribute. This, in effect, was the death blow to the whole plan, for it was nearly impossible to find another source for the necessary 52 million guilders. Eijkman's only success was that he prompted the Dutch Academy of Sciences to try to get the International Association of Academies' headquarters to The Hague, which they attempted to do at its 1913 meeting in St.-Petersburg. This attempt also failed, but it did mark the beginning of a long series of internationalist activities by the Dutch Academy, from the First World War through the 1940s.

The name of Carnegie and the inclusion of the Peace Palace in the World Capital suggest how we should situate Eijkman's initiative politically. It was meant as an extension of the pacifist movement that had been set in motion by the international Peace Conferences held in The Hague since 1899, chaired by the young queen Wilhelmina and financed by Carnegie. These meetings had led to the plan to establish an International Court of Arbitration, also in The Hague, and to this end the Peace Palace was built, again with Carnegie's financial backing. (It was finished in 1913 and is still in function today.) Eijkman clearly wanted to jump on this bandwagon of the liberal peace movement, but he also promised that he could actually take it further. For the pacifists' internationalism, Eijkman claimed, rested purely on idealism, whereas *his scientific* internationalism was not a wish but a necessary development. It was rooted in the cooperation that scientists simply needed, and hence, it provided a much more solid base for world peace. So if the Netherlands wanted to continue its role as an international pacifier, it'd better start hosting *scientific* institutions.

Now it might be asked (and it *was* asked) why a small nation like the Netherlands should take on such a central position in the world. Eijkman also had an answer to that question. It was precisely its modest size that *allowed* his country to assume this role: "Precisely (...) those nations that are great in intellectual power, yet small in brute force"⁶ were ideally suited for hosting great powers and mediating between them. This role was honorable for themselves, and acceptable for others, since they posed no threat in military or economic terms. Of course the same could be said of small countries like Morocco or Siam, but since these had no prestige in science, they could not command the kind of authority that the Netherlands could, with its Nobel prize winners Van 't Hoff, Lorentz, Zeeman, and Asser, and other scientists of comparable renown. Hence the legitimation for the Dutch' central position lay in a particular combination of strengths and weaknesses: scientific accomplishment combined with military and economic insignificance. (Eijkman expanded this set with the insignificance of the Dutch language, which gave them an advantage over the Belgians, who used *one* great power's language (French) and were therefore less harmless than the polyglot Dutchmen.)

Now the form of this rationale also reveals something of the way in which Eijkman conceived of internationalism — a conception that was in fact widely shared in its time. As he explicitly stressed, scientific internationalism was "by no means at odds with nationalism."⁷ On the contrary: it could stimulate national consciousness and pride. It was in the best interest of nations to manifest themselves strongly at international conferences, and it would only enhance a nation's glory if it could display its scientific accomplishments to the rest of the world. Science, on this view, was primarily seen as the fruit of a nation, reflecting its greatness, and as such it was comparable to music, art, and poetry, and also to economic strength and military power. International conferences and organizations allowed nations to

⁴ A.W. Reinink, *K.P.C. de Bazel – Architect* (Leiden: Universitaire Pers, 1965), p. 117.

⁵ He called it the home to "the brains of the world", *ibid.*, p. 116.

⁶ P.H. Eijkman. *Over Internationalisme* (Den Haag, Voorbereidend Bureau der Stichting voor Internationalisme, 1908), p. 8.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

compare and compete, and hence they did not counteract nationalism but effectively facilitate it. (Eijkman actually called war the oldest form of internationalism, and presented science as a continuation of war by other means).⁸

On an earlier occasion, I have argued that the Great War and its aftermath did not much to change this conception of internationalism. And the mediating activities of Lorentz *et al.* in the 1920s also continued to be framed in this way — their negotiations were all about the recognition of national greatnesses, scientific and military. *Now*, I would like to fast-forward to a later episode, where the Dutch again tried to stimulate scientific internationalism.

In 1934 and 37, and again right after the Second World War, the Dutch Academy of Science sent a number of resolutions to be adopted by the ICSU (International Council of Scientific Unions, successor to the IAA). In some respects these statements resembled Eijkman's initiatives. They stressed "the possibility (...) of peace between the world's peoples" and stated that "the 'brotherhood of scientists' can be an important factor" in reaching that end. In other respects, however, the statements sounded completely different. There was a lot of talk about social and economic problems, there was a suggestion that "an international organization" of scientists would be the ultimate solution to these, and there were expressions of hope for new and "more harmonious" social and economic structures. Moreover, the resolutions did not *support*, but explicitly *warned against* nationalism, which they saw as a danger to international relations, and which they associated with base, tribal sentiments and herd mentality — in other words: with nothing scientific. Especially nationalist trumpeting of military power was not compared to science, but to its ultimate antithesis: barbarism.

What these proposals reflected, then, was a completely different conception of scientific internationalism. While in Eijkman's scheme internationalism had included and stimulated nationalism, now it was presented as a force against it. The "brotherhood of scientists" was being called upon to *reverse* new nationalist tendencies. Moreover, the conception of science itself was different than it had been before. For Eijkman and his successors, science had primarily been a cultural good: the proud production of a nation comparable to music, poetry, and art. But now it was presented much more as an *instrument*, as a way to solve social and economic problems. While Eijkman had highlighted the creative and intellectual dimensions of science, now "the relations between pure and applied science" were explicitly emphasized. It was suggested that governments should make much more use of scientific methods, and the post-war statement even claimed that governments should be *educated* "in the aims, methods and spirit of scientific research". The reversal can best be illuminated by the way science was related to the military. Whereas for Eijkman both were different but comparable expressions of the greatness of a nation, now the two were diametrically opposed. The 1937 proposal concluded that:

The old historical tendency which considered the military and the naval organization as the most important factor of a nation and as the prime expression of its force, should nowhere find support among scientific workers, as it is contrary to our present idea of cultural advance.⁹

(Note that we are dealing with rhetoric here — not the realities of scientific involvement with the military, which were in fact huge, as David Edgerton has shown for this era.¹⁰)

Now what accounts for this reversal of values? How can we explain the new conception of scientific internationalism being expressed in the Dutch proposals of the 30s? First of all, of course the international political situation had drastically changed. The context of the peace movement had given way to a setting of growing international tension, the mass movements of fascism, and the threat of a

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁹ "Memorandum concerning a proposal for the appointment of a committee for investigating the social responsibilities of science and of scientific workers, to be submitted to the meeting of the International Council of Scientific Unions at London in April 1937", Rijksarchief Noord-Holland, Archives of the Royal Academy of Sciences, Scientific Unions 455, p. 4.

¹⁰ D.E.H. Edgerton, "British Scientific Intellectuals and the Relations of Science, Technology and War", in: P. Forman and J.M. Sánchez-Ron (eds), *National Military Establishments and the Advancement of Science and technology. Studies in 20th Century History* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1996), p. 1-35.

second world war. The resolutions' references to herd mentalities and militarism left little doubt what political developments the authors had in mind.

But there were also more specific reasons why the internationalism had changed. For the authors of the proposals of the 1930s and 40s belonged to a new generation of scientists. After Lorentz, Cohen, Went and De Sitter, whose work still fit into Eijkman's scheme of internationalism, a younger group had started to assume leading positions in the Dutch Academy. And most prominent among these were the writers of the proposals, chemist Hugo Kruyt and physicist Jan Burgers. They were different not only in age, but also because of their overt socialism, and, even more significantly, because of their willingness to combine their socialism with science. Some of the older Dutch academicians had also been socialist, like Anton Pannekoek, who was both a distinguished astronomer and a prominent Marxist theoretician. But as was typical for his generation, he kept his science and his politics apart — even to the extent that he would later write two separate autobiographies.

The new views on politics and science led to clashes within the Dutch Academy. All the talk of new economic structures and of science as a political method generated opposition from the older Went, Cohen, and even Pannekoek. They felt that science was being unduly mixed with politics in the proposals, and it was even claimed that the Dutch government should be asked for approval (which was unlikely to be given, since the government was anything but socialist). But Kruyt and Burgers saw these things differently. They actually did not *mind* omitting explicitly socialist phrases, because they felt the socialism was *implicit* in science anyway. In their view, science simply *was* a way to improve social conditions, whether this was stated in 'political' terms not. Similarly, they saw socialism as a scientific way of understanding and improving society, so that socialist and scientific approaches almost became the same thing. It was therefore no coincidence that the *values* they attributed to science in the proposals (anti-nationalism, anti-militarism, internationalism) also very much corresponded to the general ideals of socialism.

If part of this sounds familiar, it is probably no coincidence. For in writing the proposals, especially Burgers was very much inspired by the well-known Social Relations of Science Movement that was going on in Britain. He was an avid reader of H.G. Wells (who also combined science with an anti-nationalist internationalism) as well as a great follower of the editorials of *Nature*, which almost every week called for scientific approaches to social problems and international relations. Also, the closeness of science and socialism that we find in J.D. Bernal and others' writings deeply resonated with Burgers' and Kruyt's particular beliefs. Their proposals to the International Council of Scientific Unions, then, reflected a socialist view of science that was new in the Netherlands yet partly building on the British Social Relations of Science Movement. They expressed an internationalism that was by no means an unchanging feature of scientific endeavour, but a very specific and indeed a very political choice.

What we have seen in these two Dutch episodes are two completely different conceptions of scientific internationalism — one that combined pacifism with nationalistic pride, and one that wedded socialism to the ways of science. At the same time, each internationalism was the expression of particular political choices and agendas. Eijkman enlisted his international science in the cause of turn-of-the-century liberal pacifism. Kruyt and Burgers modelled their proposals on 1930s views of scientific socialism. In each case, however, the internationalism that was advocated was by no means simply a fixed trait or an inevitable part of the 'nature' of the scientific enterprise. It was the result of particular political convictions, and hence a serious expression of the political engagement of scientists.