Christianne Smit, ***De volksverheffers. Sociaal hervormers in Nederland en de wereld, 1870-1914*** (Hilversum: Verloren, 2015, 444 pp., ISBN 978 908 704 546 3).

In *De volksverheffers* (literally translated, the people's uplifters, but connoting voluntary fin de siècle social reformers) Christianne Smit captures the full range of (upper) middle-class social reformers that reflected and acted upon the social and urban questions emerging in the Netherlands during the last decades of the nineteenth century. The book draws some fundamental conclusions from an impressive amount of international primary sources, ranging from contemporary novels, voluntary association minutes, reports, memoires and periodicals. Among the most significant of these conclusions are that the Dutch *volksverheffers* were deeply entrenched in transnational social reform networks, that they were mainly progressive liberals (not socialists) and they provided the experience, knowledge and input that later, from around 1914 onwards, helped to establish social legislation and municipal services that systematically improved living conditions for the working classes in the Netherlands in the twentieth century.

Smit brings together a myriad of social reform initiatives, actions, projects, experiments and practices during the fin de siècle. Most of the cases have been touched upon in Dutch and international historiography at some length before, but Smit interlinks and interrelates seemingly distant social reform projects (e.g. worker's housing in model villages, handcraft initiatives, Esperanto, vegetarianism), and offers an integral picture. As such, she unfolds a convincing and well-documented narrative about voluntary social reform that uses the Netherlands as a case study, but includes examples and references from elsewhere.

The nexus of social reform addressed in the book, comprises of individuals and movements that adhered to a reformist imperative of instilling middle-class values and virtues in working class families and households, thus excluding the lowest echelons of society that, allegedly, were not responsive to reform initiatives. Stemming from industrial, artistic, intellectual and professional (e.g. medical doctors, teachers, academics) circles, reformers rendered public awareness about the appalling living conditions of the working classes in industrialised and urbanised settings. Moreover, they produced an astonishing amount of social reform projects, ranging from providing high-quality workers' housing and improving domestic and family life, to the most awkward initiatives with regard to the moral and (meta) physical elevation of workers and their families through clothing and diets.

Published by Royal Netherlands Historical Society | KNHG

DOI: 10.18352/bmgn-lchr.10316 | www.bmgn-lchr.nl | e-ISSN 2211-2898 | print ISSN 0615-0505

Smit argues that social reform was underpinned by a variety of paradoxical and even contradictory incentives. One the one hand, Smit discerns a genuine concern with the living conditions of the working classes among social reformers, on the other hand she shows that this concern was infused with a desire for social control and in some cases outright paternalistic dirigisme. Moral, material, intellectual and physical elevation of the working class was indeed the key purpose of social reformers. However, ultimately, a social distinction always had to be maintained between the working and the middle classes (338).

This complex reformist attitude of navigating 'concern and fear' is aptly described in the first chapter. In chapter seven this crucial observation once again comes to the fore on a more analytical level. Smit's critical discourse analysis of prominent British and Dutch reformers reveals the patronising premises behind their efforts to ameliorate the lives of others. Aspirations of 'class-transcending co-operation' and 'social blending' (364) coexisted uneasily with articulations of class difference and the moral duty of the middle classes to ameliorate the lives of the lower classes.

Taken together, the first three chapters probe the ideals and actions of social reform of the late nineteenth and very early twentieth centuries. Well-to-do philanthropists, industrialists, writers, intellectuals and progressive liberals in the Western World formed a close-knit network, based on kin, marriage, friendship, the mutual reading of each other's writings and recommended (and translated) 'social' novels. They visited each other's projects, some of which, such as Toynbee Hall and Cadbury's model factory village Bourneville in England, became reference cultures for social reformers all over the globe. The practice of *slumming*, visiting the poor neighbourhoods of London, in particular East End, even became a sort of rite-de-passage for social reformers, a necessary experience to become truly aware of the urgencies of social reform (96-97).

Chapters four, five and six offer a rich description of three realms of social reform - housing, moral and mental education and (physical) health and outdoor life. Some seminal fictional and non-fictional texts, mostly British (e.g. *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London*) or American (e.g. *How the other half lives*), inspired private initiatives to build better dwellings for workers throughout industrialised Europe. In the Netherlands this resulted in a number of privately founded and financed housing associations, which ultimately proved crucial in the establishment of public policy from the early twentieth century onwards. Moving from the physical dwelling to the realm of domestic virtues, the social work of Octavia Hill in Victorian London became the main reference for a host of – mostly female – reformers, such as Hélène Mercier, Johanna ter Meulen and Louise Went in Amsterdam, dedicating their lives to the amelioration of conditions of the worker's household.

Shifting from domestic life to education and *Bildung*, Smit outlines a great number of ideas, ideals and practices that, in general, centre on creating

self-reliance and self-reform (*Selbstreform*) among working class families. Manual (e.g. the craft of *slöjd*), intellectual (e.g. reading groups), physical (e.g. gymnastics, cycling, vegetarian diets) and social activities, preferably in nature (e.g. camping, gardening) were all geared towards creating pure, sane and balanced human beings. In many cases these reform initiatives bore clear signs of sectarian and rather radical outlooks. For instance, 'eubiotics' attracted social reform communities to resort to extremely minimal (organic or vegan) food intake and to somewhat esoterically imbued activities relating to the 'beauty and goodness' (337) in one's direct natural environment. Such radical reform movements elicited outspoken dismay from one observer, the Dutch historian Jan Romein, who wrote that all aspirations to become 'healthy and pure' amounted to 'something pathological', or even 'inhuman in its lifeless lack of humour' (336). Smit interlaces her narrative with many similar quotes, allowing the reader to notice a pleasantly submerged ironic touch, which serves as a counter-point to the sobriety and ponderousness displayed by the historical actors.

The last two chapters of the book (seven and eight) address the ethos of social reformers, in particular the gendered nature of it, and the long-term impact of the social reform ideas, ideals and experiences. Here the lengthy descriptions of social reform practices in the preceding chapters gain depth as Smit probes into the socio-cultural and socio-political contexts within which the beliefs, dilemmas and orientations of the book's protagonists took shape and were received.

De volksverheffers exposes a very solid mode of historical scholarship based on an immensely rich collection of primary sources. However, the narrative tends to rely (too) heavily on the Anglo-Dutch context. Despite some references, for instance to Scandinavian, Russian, French and German settings of social reform, a systematic assessment of the international landscape of social reform seems to be missing – as are historiographical remarks beyond the scope of the introduction. This too, is reflected in the bibliography, which omits some key publications, for instance on Francophone social reform and its transnational ramifications.[1]

Moreover, some fundamental questions remain largely untouched. The reader gets vivid descriptions of convictions, experiences and practices, but how should we understand this era of social engagement in more conceptual terms? How does it rank among the explanatory narratives of

1 Cf. Paul Rabinow, *French modern. Norms and forms of the social environment* (Chicago: the University of Chicago Press 1989); Christian Topalov (ed.), *Laboratoires du nouveau siècle. La nébuleuse réformatrice et ses réseaux en France (1880-1914)* (Paris: Ecole des hautes études en sciences sociales 1999); Daniel Laqua, *The Age of Internationalism and Belgium, 1880–1930. Peace, Progress and Prestige* (Manchester: Manchester University Press 2013).

social reform and engagement in the age of modernity? How should we assess the agency so crucial to the formation of social reform practices in more generic terms, i.e. beyond the descriptive level of entangled biographies? How should we assess the Western-centred reference cultures against the backdrop of emerging new imperialism and non-Western or non-Anglo-Saxon histories of social reform? Such and similar questions would have enabled this outstanding empirical study to connect to a wider plane of international historiography and historical sociology.

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