

Beschavingsoffensief (civilising offensive): from sociological concept to moral appeal

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Abstract: *This article discusses the history of the concept *beschavingsoffensief* (civilising offensive) in the Netherlands. Introduced in 1979, the concept was developed by sociologists, anthropologists and historians in the 1980s to analyse nineteenth century bourgeois initiatives to civilise the lower classes. Starting as a value-neutral social-scientific concept, the term got popularised in Dutch public discourse since the 1990s. It was used as a moral exhortation to ward off presumed social ills in the public sphere, like impoliteness and rudeness, vandalism and hooliganism. Its use in the public press shows that the concept has become part of a discourse on moral decline, a widespread feeling that the manners and behaviour in society are deteriorating.*

Keywords: *civilising offensive, social science in the Netherlands, public discourse, moral decline*

Introduction

In 1979 Dutch historian Piet de Rooy used the term *beschavingsoffensief* ('civilising offensive') for the first time. Describing new ideas and practices of poor relief in the nineteenth century, De Rooy placed these in a wider movement, 'the *beschavingsoffensief* that the established bourgeoisie just after 1800 had launched towards the working class' (De Rooy 1979: 9). In the same paragraph De Rooy speaks about a *burgerlijk offensief* (1979: 10), and points to the similarity of this moral movement with what Christopher Lasch had called 'the forces of organised virtue' (Lasch 1977: 169). Bernard Kruithof, a colleague of De Rooy, took over the concept and combined *burgerlijk* (bourgeois) and *beschavingsoffensief* in his article 'De deugdzame natie' (The virtuous nation, 1980). A new sociological concept was born.

In this paper, I want to elaborate on the dissemination of the term *beschavingsoffensief* in the Netherlands. As a social scientific concept it gradually came into use, though initially it was not widely used outside a limited circle of sociologists and historians. But two decades after its introduction the concept became quite popular in public discourse.

First, I will locate the origin of the concept in the intellectual and scholarly context in Amsterdam around 1980. Then I will say something about the concept itself, followed by a few remarks on its dissemination across sociology and history. In the subsequent section I will trace how the concept was used outside the social sciences in public discourse. To do so I studied the use of the term in the general daily and weekly newspapers in the Netherlands from 1990 till 2013. Finally I try to give an explanation for the popularity of the term and the associated shifts in meaning.

Intellectual context

Though the Dutch term *beschaving* is equivalent to the word civilisation, historians De Rooy and Kruithof, the first authors to use the concept *beschavingsoffensief*, do not mention Norbert Elias and his civilisation theory at all. Both writers refer to Christopher Lasch, who uses terms such as ‘discipline’, ‘social control’ and ‘forces of organised virtue’. Yet it is no coincidence that they chose a term that reminded them of Elias’s theory. Around 1980 the work of Elias had become well known among sociologists, anthropologists and historians inside and outside Amsterdam, and his civilisation theory was widely discussed. The interest in Elias’s work was part of a broader trend of rapprochement between sociology, anthropology, history and psychoanalytic psychology. This was manifest in the growing popularity of historical sociology in general, not only Elias’s civilisation theory but also Marxism and Foucault’s work. And historians became more and more attracted to the social science oriented ‘history of mentalities’ of the Annales School in France and Psycho-history in the United States.

Kruithof, like De Rooy working in the field of historical pedagogy, was a member of a group of sociologists, historians and psychologists organised by Abram de Swaan at the Department of Sociology in Amsterdam. This group came together under the name ‘Sociogenesis and Psychogenesis of Welfare Arrangements’. The Sociogenesis Group, as it was soon called, was inspired by the work of Norbert Elias on the civilising process. The group members had an historical approach in common, combined with an interest in the relationship between social and psychological processes, which were empirically researched on topics such as family relations, welfare arrangements, helping professions and education – topics that were integrated in Abram de Swaan’s *In Care of the State* (1988). Though the historians kept somewhat aloof from theoretical debates, they were also influenced by Elias’s ideas and concepts. That became clear when Kruithof and De Rooy (together with Jan Noordman) edited the handbook *Geschiedenis van opvoeding en onderwijs (History of upbringing and education)* (1982). It started with the article ‘Norbert Elias and our civilisation’ by Nico Wilterdink, followed by Ernst Mulder’s ‘Elias and education’. The book also included Kruithof’s ‘De deugdzame natie’ (The virtuous nation) and my own article on the upbringing of working-class children. Yet, in the beginning the term *beschavingsoffensief* was only loosely associated with Norbert Elias’s civilisation theory.

The concept *beschavingsoffensief*

The core of the civilising process in Elias’s theory is, in shorthand, a long-term development in emotion management, an increasing constraint towards self-control, starting in the upper strata of society and spreading over wider layers of the population. In Elias’s work, distinction and imitation are the mechanisms through which this process takes place. Though in *The Civilising Process* Elias makes some remarks about the civilisation of the lower classes, for instance by the church, and his use of the concept ‘colonisation’ points in the direction of what later on is called a civilising offensive, he does not elaborate on this mechanism, and it plays no part in his analysis of the civilising process as a whole. Therefore it could be questioned whether the concept *beschavingsoffensief* fits within the civilisation theory.

Firstly, in Elias’s theory, the civilising process is an unintended, unplanned social development, a result of shifting power balances and interdependencies, particularly under the impact of state formation. People force each other towards more civilised behaviour in reciprocal competition to distinguish themselves from each other; imitation of that behaviour by lower groups leads to further refinement of standards and self-control by higher groups. A civilising offensive, on the contrary, is an intended and planned initiative to change the behaviour of lower groups.

Secondly, there is a tension between distinction and imitation on the one hand and integration or incorporation on the other. Distinction is oriented to increasing inequality and difference, a civilising offensive, on the other hand, is oriented to integration of lower groups in the culture of the higher strata or, in other words, to decrease the differences.

Yet, the concept *beschavingsoffensief* is not incompatible with the civilisation theory for the following reasons. Though the civilisation process as a whole is unplanned, during that process dominant groups may take specific actions to civilise lower strata. And empirically it can be demonstrated that they have often done so with a certain measure of success. Of course it is important to point to the difference between a civilising offensive and its effects. The fact that the behaviour of the lower classes changed in the direction of more self-control does not prove that this was the result of these offensives. Changes in interdependencies – in social, economic and political relations – always form the conditions under which a civilising offensive may have any influence, but a civilising offensive could have contributed to changes in behaviour. In the same way, distinction and incorporation do not necessarily exclude one another. We can safely say that in all agrarian societies ruling groups tried to impose certain norms and behavioural standards on the lower orders. In the Middle Ages and the early modern time this was mainly done by the church, in the eighteenth and nineteenth century bourgeois groups took the lead (cf. Wilterdink 2008). Connected to the increasing interdependence through industrialisation and nation formation, the pressure to elevate and civilise the lower classes increased, and the newly formed upper and middle classes actively sought to change the behavioural standards of the lower orders. Their goal was not only to bring them to outward compliance to rules, but to the internalisation of those rules or, in other words, to self-control. It is important to note that the ‘elevation’ of the lower classes was not meant to make them the equals of the bourgeoisie. The distance between the classes was still so enormous that upper classes could try to uplift the lower classes to a higher level of civilisation without having to fear that they would lose their distinctive qualities.

Yet, with these thoughts in mind, the concept *beschavingsoffensief* can be linked to the civilisation theory. Attempts of higher or dominant groups towards less powerful groups – oriented to teach the latter more disciplined behavioral standards, more flexible emotion management, and more self-reflection and self-control – must be analysed as part of a more general civilising process that results from growing interdependencies between certain social groups or strata in society. In this way, the concept is not only useful in studying such attempts in the past, but can also be utilised to analyse the actions of certain groups towards other groups whose problems are seen as resulting from a lack of self-control.

‘Beschavingsoffensief’ or ‘discipline’?

At the time that the term *beschavingsoffensief* was introduced, civilisation theory had important historical-sociological rivals, especially on topics which were central to the Sociogenesis Group. These alternative theories can be characterised by the term ‘control perspective’. Welfare arrangements were analysed with regard to their disciplinary effects, to the power and control they exert on the complete way of life of the recipients. Some of the authors worked from a Marxist perspective (Piven & Cloward 1971; Lis & Soly 1980), but the main source of inspiration was Michel Foucault’s book *Discipline and Punish* (1977). Jacques Donzelot, a student of Foucault, developed this perspective in the book *La police des familles (The Policing of Families, 1977)*. This book influenced many social scientists in their research on the dominance of the helping professions over the life of the lower classes. Donzelot described the changes in working-class families as a result of new power strategies beginning in the eighteenth century, launched by a new group of helpers, the philanthropists. Through the use of various disciplinary techniques they changed the way of life of the population in the direction needed by the liberal state. The contribution of the helping professions to the

formation of new family arrangements was also the central theme of Christopher Lasch' *Haven in a Heartless World* (1977). According to Lasch, therapists and other social professionals intruded into families, destroyed the autonomy of the family, and declared parents incompetent to raise their children. Though Lasch analysed professional interventions in bourgeois families at around 1900, and not in lower-class families, his perspective is similar to that of Donzelot.

It was within this theoretical debate that I tried to define my own position while writing my thesis on working-class families in the Netherlands between 1870 and 1940 (De Regt 1984). I belonged to the Amsterdam sociologists working in Elias's perspective, and analysed the changes in Dutch working-class family life as a process of civilisation: a change towards a more balanced, more even and more encompassing regulation of family relations, intimate life and emotions. I sought a first explanation in changing socio-economic conditions which gradually opened up new chances for women and men to improve their position and follow a lifestyle oriented to that of the middle classes.

A second line in my explanation was the influence of bourgeois groups. I analysed in detail the workings of three organised welfare initiatives to raise lower class families from their situation of poverty. All three focused on family and home life. The Amsterdam poor relief organisation *Liefdadigheid Naar Vermogen* ('Charity according to ability', 1871), modelled after the London Charity Organisation Society introduced the 'modern' method of poor relief in the Netherlands. A second initiative was the work of lady rent collectors, originated in London in the 1860s and adopted in the Netherlands in the 1890s. These women aimed to improve the housing conditions of the lower classes by enforcing standards of behaviour such as cleanliness, orderliness and punctual rent-paying. While these two initiatives originated in the bourgeoisie, a third initiative was an example of status strivings within the working classes. In Amsterdam, the local Social-Democratic government initiated a housing policy in which a distinction between 'respectable' and 'unrespectable' families was put into effect. Families who lacked minimum standards of civilised behaviour were assigned to housing projects specially built for 'unacceptable families', where they were put under supervision to learn how to live a decent life. These projects set an example for similar projects in various Dutch towns (Van Wel 1992; see also Van Ginkel (2015) in this issue).

Though in the title of my book (de Regt 1984) I used the term *beschavingsarbeid* (civilising work) and not the term *beschavingsoffensief*, in the text I elaborated on the concept *beschavingsoffensief* and explained why I had used a concept that was close to civilisation theory, although not used by Elias himself, instead of the concepts of Foucault and Donzelot. I pointed out that the last mentioned authors put a one-sided emphasis on the disciplinary interests of the helpers and departed from the idea that those interests were contrary to those of the working classes. The possibility that the new rules and behavioural standards were in accordance with the wishes and interests of lower groups, shaped by changing life conditions, and that the families concerned accepted or even actively asked for certain arrangements was actually ruled out. In my empirical chapters I presented various examples in which the latter was the case. A second critique on Foucault *cum suis* was that they made no distinction between disciplining strategies and the actual effects of these interferences (cf. Franke 1988). The failure of discipline caused by resistance, manipulation or indifference on the part of the recipients was not discussed, and so the influence of the helping professions on changes in the lifestyle of the lower classes was often exaggerated. I argued that these nuances could be fitted in more easily in a civilisation approach.

The dissemination of the concept in the 1980s

After its introduction in 1979/1980 the concept *beschavingsoffensief*, gradually gained some popularity in the 1980s, especially among authors who published in the *Amsterdams Sociologisch Tijdschrift* (AST). Established in the early 1970s by Amsterdam social scientists working in various theoretical traditions, in the 1980s the AST was edited by a more homogeneous group of social scientists working from the figurational perspective: sociologists Christien Brinkgreve, Kees Bruin, Bart van Heerikhuizen and Nico Wilterdink, anthropologist Kitty Verrips and historian Bernard Kruithof. Though the AST published articles on a wide range of topics from different theoretical perspectives, authors who had an affinity with figurational sociology were well represented. The subject of the articles in which the term 'civilising offensive' was used was usually a nineteenth century middle-class initiative that sooner or later changed into a state intervention. This was, for instance, the case with poor relief (De Regt 1982), domestic science education (De Rooy 1985), cookery teachers (Van Otterloo 1985), child protection (Kruithof & De Rooy 1987), unhealthy dwellings (Kalff 1987), prison life (Franke 1988) and infant care (Van Daalen 1990). Furthermore the AST published theoretical articles and debates in which the concept was used (Brunt 1984; Mitzman 1986; Kruithof & Verrips 1987). But also outside the AST the concept was used by social scientists and historians (see Röling 1982; Meurkens 1984; Frijhoff 1985; Verrips 1987; Davids 1987; Lenders 1988; Rooijackers 1991).

Though the range of topics was quite wide, it is interesting to note that the historians and anthropologists applied the concept *beschavingsoffensief* to different topics than the sociologists. They focused essentially on the struggle between popular culture and elite culture and the attempts of elites to change the mentalities of the popular classes; see for instance Arthur Mitzman in his discussion of the ideas of the *Annales* authors and psychohistorians (1986). [1][#N1] This was also true for Dutch anthropologists and historians (Frijhoff 1985; Wildenbeest 1986; Verrips 1987; Davids 1987; Helsloot 1991; Rooijackers 1991; Sleebe 1992; Van Ginkel 1996; Van den Brink 1996). They wrote about specific villages, towns or regions where a civilising offensive was initiated and enforced by local elites and churches to change public morals through summons against and prohibition of certain folk beliefs, rituals, public feasts, customs and pastimes seen as uncivilised. Sociologists focused less on local cultures, but more on the direct interference of professionals with the intimate life of the urban working classes and how this changed family relations, emotions and personalities of the recipients (De Regt 1984; Kalff 1987; Franke 1988; Van Daale 1990).

Popularisation of the concept from the 1990s

The concept *beschavingsoffensief* was meant as a value-neutral sociological term to describe and analyse various activities by dominant individuals or groups towards less powerful groups. Nonetheless the term had from its introduction a critical undertone, strengthened by the word *offensief* (offensive) which sounds rather militant. In the course of the 1990s, however, the concept was taken over in public discourse, lost its specific sociological meaning and changed from a non-evaluative, or slightly negative, to a more positive term.

In this section I will trace this shift in use and meaning of the term in Dutch daily and weekly newspapers. [2][#N2] The starting point of analysis is 1990; only from that year on are the papers available in digital form and can they be analysed with headwords. Even then, the whole corpus of papers is not complete and there are omissions and errors. Therefore I abstain from a quantitative analysis and restrict myself to a thematic ordering and analysis of the various topics and uses of the concept. The articles in the newspapers vary considerably: news items, book reviews, essays, interviews, columns, letters to the editor, announcements. Sometimes the word *beschavingsoffensief* is only mentioned in passing; sometimes it is quite central in the argument at hand; sometimes it is used by a journalist; sometimes by a book reviewer, a spokesman on a

specific topic or an interviewee. I read all the articles, long or short, and analysed the topics, the context and the meanings given to the term.

In the general press the concept 'civilising offensive' was used in several ways. Firstly in a sociological way. This is the case in reviews of sociological or historical books that contained the term *beschavingsoffensief*, books about: historical changes in certain regions, towns and neighbourhoods; the history of material culture, housing and design; theatre plays; health organisations and professions like nursing; nature studies; and all kinds of leisure activities. In these books the concept *beschavingsoffensief* was not restricted to the nineteenth century, but extended to earlier periods, from the Greek and Roman period, through the Middle Ages to the early modern time. The civilising influence ascribed to Plato, to churches, monasteries and missionaries, to Gregorian music, medieval stories, sixteenth-century theatre plays and so on, shows that the term was widened far beyond bourgeois offensives. In most cases the reviewers mentioned the concept *beschavingsoffensief* without discussing the term. One reviewer criticised the 'Eliasean straitjacket' of the author, and one reviewer praised an author for his specific use of the term where, according to him, many historians applied the concept without specifying its exact meaning.

In the same way the term *beschavingsoffensief* was used in all kinds of articles on current events, such as yearly festivities, pastimes and anniversaries like carnivals, fun fairs, skating, singing, gardening, Sinterklaas (Santa Claus) and Queen's day. These events were placed in historical perspective and described as the result of a *beschavingsoffensief* in former times.

One topic that was often mentioned in association with the concept *beschavingsoffensief* was 'high culture'. Here, the term was introduced by sociologist and journalist Warna Oosterbaan to describe the government policy to spread high culture from cultural elites to the population at large. The function of art to civilise the less privileged is often mentioned in the newspapers in neutral terms, as a fact that needs no explanation. In (historical) articles – on for instance architecture, dancing, theatre, design, museums and music – references are made to a *beschavingsoffensief* without further comment. Sometimes a critical note could be heard, for instance when in 1999 the Dutch Minister of Culture proclaimed 'art for as many people as possible' as a cultural ideal, one paper called this 'the militant terminology of the socialist civilising offensive', referring to the traditional socialist idea that the arts could be used to uplift the lower classes. The same was true in commentaries on a massive demonstration against considerable budget cuts for the arts in 2010. The protest movement under the heading 'Long live civilisation!' was described as a civilising offensive in a positive sense, but others criticised the protesters' rejection of popular taste.

A civilising offensive as remedy

It was halfway through the 1990s that the term *beschavingsoffensief* acquired the moral overtones it has kept until this day, when it became part of a general discourse of moral decline. [3]f#N3] Such a discourse was, of course, not restricted to the Netherlands, but became stronger in all western societies. In the Netherlands, the concern about what in dramatic terms was called the 'rack and ruin' of society, increasing *hufterigheid* (a combination of boorish and arrogant) behaviour and rudeness in general, the decline of neighbourhoods, the violent and destructive behaviour of youngsters in the public sphere and on the sport fields, evoked worried commentaries from all sides.

To reverse this trend, a *beschavingsoffensief* was suggested as one of the solutions. In hundreds of articles in the newspapers the term was used in exhortations, remedies, concrete proposals and discussions. Sometimes the appeals were of a rather abstract kind: 'We need a new *beschavingsoffensief*', or: 'Every generation needs a *beschavingsoffensief*'. Sometimes the proposals were more specific.

One of the influential spokesmen for a ‘new civilising offensive’ was cultural sociologist Gabriël van den Brink. In his book on the family (1997) he made a plea for a *beschavingsoffensief* towards families: help to multi-problem families and families in need including information, prevention, education and health care. His book got ample attention in the papers. It got several reviews and in subsequent interviews the author reiterated the need for a civilising offensive. In discussions on moral decline, the book by Van den Brink was often mentioned.

The concept *beschavingsoffensief* was also spread in public discourse by politicians who pleaded for more civilised behaviour. This appeal was not restricted to one political party, but was voiced by politicians from the right to the left. [4],[#N4]. In 2002, the Christian-Democrat party leader Jan Peter Balkenende made an urgent call for more ‘decency’ in public life to ward off rudeness; this appeal and that of his fellow party members was reiterated many times, especially during the time that Balkenende was the Dutch prime minister. But conservative members of the liberal party also called for more civilised behaviour. And Wilders, the party leader of the right-wing Freedom Party, called for a civilising offensive against immigrants, while others thought a *beschavingsoffensief* against Wilders was needed. In 2008, the social-democratic minister of Home Affairs proposed an offensive against boorishness and rudeness and formulated a ‘value catalogue’ of good behaviour. And in 2013 an emotional plea for a *beschavingsoffensief* was made by the chairman of the Labour Party. Fed up with the severe threats he had received by e-mail and Twitter, he thought it wise to publish a selection of those messages, accompanied with a call for a civilising offensive. He got support from his fellow party member, the Minister of Home Affairs, who had earlier demanded a ‘decency offensive’. This action provoked much commentary, mostly supportive, though some papers warned against censure of the social media. All these appeals attracted attention in the media, and made the concept ‘civilising offensive’ more current.

Though the term *beschavingsoffensief* was used in lamentations about a general moral decline, it was more often utilised in the context of specific problems, mostly behaviour in public spaces. It started in the early 1990s with press articles about initiatives in various cities against urinating in public places (*wildplassen*), which were called a *beschavingsoffensief* by the authorities concerned. Some years later this struggle became part of a wider offensive: the introduction of ‘city manners’ (*stadsetiquette*) to repress normless behaviour. The idea of a ‘city etiquette’ got wide publicity, first in Rotterdam. Other cities also launched similar plans for more civilised behaviour. These plans varied from curbing cycling through red lights, urinating in the streets, throwing litter on the streets, dog shit on the pavement, to measures against the use of alcohol and drugs, violence and criminality. The measures to ‘instill norms and values’ included, for instance, CCTV, more ‘blauw’ (police) in the streets, a ‘tit-for-tat policy’, and obligatory courses for parents on how to improve the education of their children. Police officers played an important role in these public announcements of civilising offensives. They proclaimed a new *beschavingsoffensief* to recapture their authority in the city. It is probable that they felt attacked by all the complaints about the degradation of the public sphere. An example was the Chief Constable of Amsterdam who announced in his 2006 New Year’s message a *beschavingsoffensief*, directed at ‘more decency’, ‘proper manners’, and what was called ‘longer fuses’. ‘Short fuses’ had become a popular term to explain all kinds of rude behaviour in public: people could not control themselves when something did not suit them. At the same time the Chief Constable applied his civilising offensive against his own officers: no long hair, no tattoos, no piercings, shined shoes. His speech was widely discussed in the newspapers, mostly favourably.

Public transport was a key focus of complaints about uncivilised behaviour. In 1997 a train passenger asked in a letter to the editor for a civilising offensive on trains. Later on, the *beschavingsoffensief* by the Rotterdam public transport authorities to improve behaviour on buses and trams was widely discussed. The authorities announced that rude behaviour, aggression and fare dodging would be tackled by the introduction of ‘mobile’

conductors and the right to use handcuffs by special employees, but also by what was called ‘a shrewd *beschavingsoffensief*’. This was adopted by other public transport organisations that also considered a civilising offensive necessary. In 2008, a Taskforce on Safe Public Transport was introduced, announced in the newspaper as the ‘Short Fuses Taskforce’.

In many of these instances young people were the special target of the *beschavingsoffensief*. Their alleged rudeness in public space, on public transport and their aggression on and off the sport fields attracted commentaries that civilising offensives had to be directed towards these youngsters. In 2002, a civilising offensive for sports was announced under the title ‘Sportsmanship and respect’ to restrain misbehaviour on and off the playing fields. The problems regarded all sports, but were especially concentrated on football, with rudeness and abuse on the football field continually reported in the papers. The violence against, and subsequent death of, a linesman by supporters of the opposing team in the winter of 2012 again invited calls for a *beschavingsoffensief* in football. However, a civilising offensive was not only needed to curb violence and abuse on and around the playing fields, but also to promote acceptance of homosexuality and to discourage anti-semitism.

Perhaps it is surprising that the term *beschavingsoffensief* was not used more often in the context of the behaviour of migrants. Negative comments on the behaviour of *allochtonen* (the Dutch concept for non-western minorities) can be heard regularly in public discourse. In my research I found several references to ethnic minorities and the need for a civilising offensive, though not as much as I had expected. The concept was used in an influential and much discussed article by Paul Scheffer (2000), who criticised the neglect of the problems caused by *allochtonen* in Dutch society and stressed the need for a *beschavingsoffensief*. Others, like Gabriël van den Brink and an Amsterdam local administrator of Moroccan origin propagated a civilising offensive to promote modern attitudes in Muslims, to ward off anti-semitism and homophobia, and to stop aggressive behaviour against public servants.

In complaints about moral decline, sexuality has always been of great concern. Yet, the term civilising offensive to improve sexual morality was hardly ever used. In the 1990s, a television campaign against sexual violence, commissioned by the government, was introduced in an interview as a ‘civilising offensive’, with such exhortations as ‘temper your sexual assertiveness’ and ‘sex is not obligatory’. In 2007, a member of parliament, worrying about too much pornography and nakedness, so easily available for young people on the internet, called for a civilising offensive, but these are exceptions.

Contesting civilising offensives

Despite the spread of the moral connotation of the term ‘civilising offensive’, opinions about the content of a civilising offensive differed. The dominant meaning was the teaching of decency, good manners, and polite public behaviour in general, in particular to youngsters, users of public transport, football players and fans, and migrants. But some publicists and politicians gave alternative meanings to the concept: they propagated a civilising offensive oriented to tolerance, individual responsibility, uncertainty-resistance and self-relativisation, in short a form of emotion management that is linked to what Cas Wouters (1990) has called informalisation.

Concern about commercialised sex, for instance, led in 2008 to various publications by left-liberals about the need for what they called an ‘erotic *beschavingsoffensief*’. This term got wider publicity when a film-maker showed a widely discussed documentary on television in which a plea was made for a non-commercialised kind of sexuality: no porno, no prudery, ‘slow sex’ instead of ‘turbo sex’. The term ‘erotic *beschavingsoffensief*’

pointed not so much to repression but to the teaching of an open, more liberal and a more self-controlled attitude to sexuality.

In 2006, the party leader of the *Partij voor de Dieren* (Animal Party) used the concept for the need to improve relations between humans and animals, as a first step to remedy the balance between humans and nature in general. She asked for animal rights in the constitution, the prohibition of vivisection and a ban on the bio-industry, and reiterated that plea in later years.

Even earlier than the Animal Party, the Green Party (GL) brought the term *beschavingsoffensief* into political discourse. In the election campaign of 2002 the political leader of GL introduced civilisation as an important theme and saw a civilising offensive as one of her political missions. In the years 2008–09 this ‘civilising offensive from the left’ was more widely discussed in the press. What this meant was contested between various leftist spokesmen. Some advocated the socialist ideal of uplifting the people, others the left-liberal tradition of individual freedom. Two (ex-)members of GL, both sociologists and publicists, represented these diverging opinions in the papers. Evelien Tonkens called for moral education, social service, and the uplifting of virtues, tastes and interests; and agreed in that respect with the conservative English psychiatrist Dalrymple. Dick Pels on the other hand saw free-thinking individualism as the core of a civilising offensive. But both saw ‘relativity’, ‘uncertainty’, ‘tolerance’, and ‘self-mockery’ as essential virtues to be taught to the public. And both reacted strongly against capitalistic ‘grabbers’ and announced that the middle classes and the top incomes should not be exempted from a civilising offensive.

In the course of the 1990s the concept *beschavingsoffensief* as a positive moral category became dominant in the general press: moral improvement of sections of the population was applauded. However, from its beginning this opinion was contested, and provoked counter-arguments. Critics warned against moralisation and gave vent to an aversion to what they called patronising actions and paternalism. They talked about ‘new moral censors’, ‘inappropriate meddling’, ‘brawny language’ and ‘nitpicking’. They thought that a civilising offensive meant only a moral appeal and strict enforcement of rules, and asked for practical measures such as more police, more conductors, better teachers, better housing, and neighbourhood improvements. Others subsumed these measures into their plea for a civilising offensive.

Appeals for a civilising offensive by politicians in particular were heavily criticised and ridiculed. When this call came from conservative parties, leftist people took up arms against ‘conservative straitjackets’, when from parties on the left, conservatives complained that their programme was being taken over, while liberals accused both sides of paternalism.

A civilising offensive against ethnic minorities was also contested. It was seen as a sign of growing intolerance. Paul Scheffer’s article, mentioned above, gave rise to intense debate. One reviewer even said that what the author proposed was not a *beschavingsoffensief* but a *Kulturkampf*. In 2004, the Minister of Home Affairs, Verdonk, voiced her indignation about the refusal of an imam to shake hands with her; she saw this as an example of the unacceptable manners of immigrants. In the discussion that followed her adversaries accused her of waging a ‘narrow-minded civilising offensive’ against ethnic minorities; her attempts at ‘submission’ were seen as ‘excessive’. In the same context of immigrants, the introduction of a fixed Dutch history canon for schools in 2006 was called a ‘ruthless *beschavingsoffensief*’ to conserve a traditional national culture.

Conclusion

In the previous section I analysed the shift in use and connotation of the concept *beschavingsoffensief* in Dutch newspapers from 1990 until now. I concentrated on the main themes in which the term was used and

the meanings which were, explicitly or implicitly, given to the term. It was impossible to discuss all the variations and topics I found in the papers. For instance, I left out the scattered references made to the role of the media and remarks about civilising offensives abroad.

During the whole period under study the term remained in use in reviews of historical studies and in retrospectives of organisations, pastimes and events that had been called civilising offensives by historians, sociologists and anthropologists. The fact that the concept was originally used for activities of the nineteenth century bourgeoisie but was then widened to other periods and groups was never commented upon in the reviews.

In the course of the 1990s the concept of civilising offensive was increasingly linked to all kinds of contemporary social evils, and used in a normative and moralising way. Most of the time the moralisation concerned the problems of indecency, violence, vandalism, hooliganism or plain rudeness in public places, and a lack of 'norms and values' in general. A civilising offensive was seen as a means of teaching civilised behaviour to those who demonstrated that kind of behaviour: the inhabitants of the old working-class neighbourhoods, youngsters, immigrants, users of public transport, football players and other sportsmen and sport fans. But an alternative, left-liberal meaning, referring to the teaching of tolerance and individual responsibility could also be found in the papers.

In certain respects, the sociological meaning of the concept *beschavingsoffensief* and the meaning of the term in public discourse is not very different. In both cases the term refers to actions to control all kinds of behaviour which are seen as unfavourable. But the aspect of self-control, so fundamental in the sociological concept, is often lost in everyday use. Moreover, in the social sciences it is an analytical concept, used to explain the actions of dominant groups by linking them to changing interdependencies between groups. The popular concept, on the other hand, is used as an exhortation to start interventions to curb all sorts of deviant behaviour and has no explanatory connotations.

The explanation of the shift towards moralisation can be found in the societal developments since the 1960s. On introduction in the early 1980s, the concept *beschavingsoffensief* had a slightly critical connotation. This was a heritage of the 1960s and 1970s when class inequalities, power differences and hierarchical social relations in general were under attack, both in society as a whole and in the social sciences. To define differences in culture in a hierarchical order was disapproved of. Civilising offensives implied unequal relations between classes, and top-down interventions in the habits and mentalities of the lower classes. Therefore, the nineteenth-century initiatives were regarded with a critical distance, even by the social scientists who preferred the term *beschavingsoffensief* over more value-loaded concepts like 'discipline' and 'social control'.

But in the 1990s the heritage of the 1960s seriously came under attack. Greater freedom of action for nearly everyone, the relative increase in equality between the classes, the generations and the sexes, the informalisation of manners and the vagueness of rules had brought about new problems of obedience and authority (Wouters 1990; 2007). The concern with public morality, rude behaviour, lack of discipline, increasing aggression and criminality went hand in hand with anxiety about the behaviour of ethnic minorities and their perceived unwillingness to adapt to Dutch culture. It gave rise to calls for action and concrete interventions to remedy these social ills. The term *beschavingsoffensief* became a term to refer to these various actions.

Yet, it is not easy to explain why the social scientific term *beschavingsoffensief* was so readily taken over in public discourse in the Netherlands. Historians, sociologists and sociologically trained publicists introduced the concept in the public press, mostly using it in a sociological sense and applying it to historical events. But why did the concept become so appealing to a non-sociological public, and why was it used as an answer to

social concerns, defined as problems of morality? Perhaps it was so easily accepted in public discourse because it is an easy catch phrase: the word is emotionally charged, its meaning seems self-evident, it sounds energetic and can be used for a variety of interventions. Moreover, the Dutch term *beschaving* is an old word, popularised from the eighteenth century (Den Boer 2001). The call for a new *beschavingsoffensief* is also linked to the ‘cultural turn’ in both society and the social sciences since the 1990s. In sociology, the tendency to define and explain social problems not as a result of structural inadequacies but as cultural insufficiencies became stronger; lack of norms and values, wrong habits, no morals were seen as main causes. And in line with this, remedies were sooner sought in the teaching of discipline and the stricter enforcement of rules than in structural improvements, as had been advocated in the 1970s and 1980s.

Finally, this leads to the question as to whether the concept *beschavingsoffensief* remains useful as a sociological concept while its normative denotation has become so dominant. I think this is only the case when we return to the original meaning of the concept, and link it with Norbert Elias’s civilisation theory. If we restrict the term to an analysis of the interventions in the life of certain groups with the aim of instilling more self-control, the concept has not only historical value, but can be helpful to shed light on contemporary practices.

Notes

1. Mitzman’s article was published in English in 1987 in the *Journal of Social History*, a starting point for the use of the concept in English (cf. Powell 2013).[♣][\[#N1-pt1\]](#)
2. These newspapers are available in digital form in the system Lexis-Nexis, starting in 1990. The Nexis-Lexis file consists of all Dutch weekly magazines, national newspapers, regional papers and all regional and local editions of the national and regional papers, altogether 58 papers. I analysed the Lexis-Nexis file with the headword *beschavingsoffensief*. From 1990 to 2013 the file gave about 1000 hits. For various reasons a quantitative analyses was not possible: first many hits refer to the same article in different papers. For instance messages from the Dutch Press Bureau (ANP) are adopted literally; second among the 58 papers there are many different editions of the same paper with exactly the same articles, and third the file has omissions and doubles.
I read all the articles, analysed them by categorising the various uses of the concept and singled out the most important categories. In the text I give no references to the exact finding places: the amount of papers is too large and the article would become unreadable, especially for non-Dutch readers.[♣][\[#N2-pt1\]](#)
3. The perception of moral decline is widespread in contemporary Western societies. Questioned as to whether they saw the state of moral values getting better or worse in their country, ‘moral decline’ was indicated by 62 per cent of a Dutch sample in 2006, by 83 per cent of British respondents in 2007 and by 76 per cent of a US sample in 2010 (Wilterdink 2010).[♣][\[#N3-pt1\]](#)
4. These moral exhortations were not restricted to the Netherlands. See for instance Powell and Flint (2009) on Tony Blair’s Respect Agenda to curb anti-social behaviour in the UK.[♣][\[#N4-pt1\]](#)

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