

Containing the Urban Poor – Coercion or Consent? Disciplining Missions and Civilising Offensives in the Netherlands

Rob van Ginkel

UNIVERSITY OF AMSTERDAM

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Abstract: *This paper will show that civilising offensives of the upper middle class and the labour movement elite in twentieth-century Holland often led to social exclusion of certain segments of ‘the common people’. Instead of culturally ‘uplifting’ them as was the stated intention, in some cases the efforts proved to be disciplining missions aimed at containing the lowest classes. In many instances, these moralist actions had negative social consequences. Rather than (re)integrating those who were regarded as *onaangepasten* (maladapted people), they were often stigmatised and marginalised as second-rate citizens, who were literally banished to the societal periphery. Obviously, less extreme forms of civilising offensives also existed, but these, too, were usually about disciplining rather than enlightening.*

Keywords: *civilising offensives; disciplining; established-outsiders figuration; underclass; housing projects for urban outcasts.*

Introduction

In the 1980s, several Dutch sociologists, anthropologists and historians considered the term ‘civilising offensive’ to be a useful sensitising concept. Although it was not part of his conceptual apparatus, it seemed to connect well with Norbert Elias’s ‘civilisation theory’ (Elias 1978/1982), which by that time had become popular in the Amsterdam social science scene (see de Regt 2015, this issue). These Dutch scholars used the concept of ‘civilising offensive’ in a rather loose sense. It pointed to a social and cultural process that many recognised as a multi-guised feature of developments in modern society. The military metaphor of ‘offensive’ refers – at least implicitly – to a one-sided process. There are those who launch an offensive, and there are the offensive’s *targets* (or perhaps even *victims*) who undergo attempts to civilise them, albeit not necessarily passively. Elias distinguished a long-term process of *Fremdzwang* and *Selbstzwang* (social constraints and self-restraints), where the former would gradually lead to the latter through a process of internalisation (Elias 1978/1982). External force would sooner or later make way for internal force (or self-restraint and self-control), a long-term process of changing behavioural standards that was ‘blind’ as no-one had intended or foreseen its particular outcome. Pierre Bourdieu coined the term *habitus* to refer to this unconscious dimension (Bourdieu 1984: 170).

In contradistinction, a ‘civilising *offensive*’ has strong overtones of intentionality. The intentionality of power is also clear in the case of *Fremdzwang*: it targets individuals or social figurations with the explicit objective to bring about behavioural change. There is indeed a good deal of coercion, of ‘disciplining’ in the Foucauldian sense or of ‘internal colonisation’ (Hechter 1975): the creation of disciplined citizens in processes of state and nation formation. In order to bring about a higher level of uniformity and order, it is the ‘goal of the modern

state [...] to reduce the chaotic, disorderly, constantly changing social reality beneath it' (Scott 1998: 82). As James Scott reminds us, 'modern statecraft is largely a project of internal colonisation, often glossed, as it is in imperial rhetoric, as a "civilising mission"' (ibid.). The metaphor of 'mission' may be slightly less militaristic in tone than 'offensive', but its meaning is no less clear while its moralist overtones are evident. The power balance is clearly skewed towards the 'civilisers', who may or may not be state representatives.

Scott attributes such initiatives to statehood. Though homogenising initiatives may indeed emanate from the state, in the highly paternalistic society of the Netherlands there was widespread collusion from the middle classes and the upper segments of the labour class. Some citizens would seem to think that they have a moral obligation or an ethical duty to 'civilise' or 'uplift' others. Their efforts are one-directionally aimed at the lower classes, although occasionally also in a very general sense but without practical implications at the upper class (usually because the elite is considered to be cosmopolitan, and therefore insufficiently national or nationalist – see van Ginkel 1999). What it means to be 'civilised' is therefore largely defined by the middle classes, and very normatively so. To be civilised means among many other things to show restraint and self-control in all sorts of respects, to have formal instead of informal relations and to live one's private life indoors instead of outdoors. This normative dimension makes using the concept of 'civilising offensive' perhaps a bit tricky. But there may be considerable consent among the targets of such efforts. They perceive considerable benefits in complying with standards of behaviour that are new to them. In this instance, external force often quickly makes way for voluntary behavioural change in an attempt at self-emancipation. This is particularly so in the case of organised and skilled labourers.

However, a civilising process is not necessarily a 'benign' process. In addition to its normative dimension, consent may be difficult to achieve. There is a slippery slope between well-intended paternalism and uncivil coercion, where subjects are not so much educated to become enlightened citizens, but are continually surveyed and regulated to keep them in check as objects. Efforts 'to civilise the uncivil' may then amount to little less than lower-class containment. When middle-class people take offence at certain types of behaviour of others (usually when their internalised standards of 'good behaviour' are offended or transgressed), they have no incentives to uplift the transgressors to their own standards. While they may seek to uplift specific social categories up to a certain point – always carefully maintaining social status distinctions (Elias 1978/1982; Bourdieu 1984) – middle-class civilisers often have no intention to extend their efforts to the poorest and unruliest urban dwellers. They merely want to keep them out of sight – and out of mind – and restrict (or restrain) them so that they (the 'respectable' middle-class citizens) will not be offended. The present article addresses this particular aspect of the twentieth-century civilising offensive in the Netherlands.

During a considerable part of the twentieth century, many urban outcasts were deemed 'inadmissible' (*ontoelaatbaar*) – a term used in the Netherlands between the early 1930s and late 1950s without any reservation whatsoever. Initially, it referred to the fact that such groups were not deemed admissible to proper housing (Dercksen and Verplanke 1997: 7), but its significance soon broadened. Being classified as inadmissible implied not just stigmatisation; one was effectively barred from taking part in ordinary social life. Subsequently, such classifications were increasingly avoided for their pejorative connotations (see de Regt 1986). With the rise of the welfare state and the concomitant process of bourgeoisification, the problem of the 'inadmissible' seemed to have vanished. However, under neo-capitalist conditions and welfare state reforms, it returned and with it the classificatory labelling. The culprits were dubbed 'a-socials' (*asocialen*), 'louts' (*hufters*) or 'trash' (*tuig*). The taboo on using such epithets withered away rapidly and, currently, many local policymakers have no problem whatsoever in using them.

The question arises, then, whether 'civilising offensive' is an appropriate term for some of the phenomena that relate to efforts to shackle the unruly 'underclass'. Although it may continue to be useful as a sensitising concept, as an analytical concept it is so entangled with normative dimensions that it is perhaps better to

refrain from applying it at all. Civilising implies educating the ignorant, uplifting the masses, and teaching them civil standards of behaviour. Was this the goal civilisers aimed at? Or did they predominantly attempt to contain those who avoided submitting to and abiding by hegemonic relations? In this article, I will briefly describe the developments concerning the ways in which members of the middle classes and the organised labour class dealt with the unruly ‘underclass’ from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. The question was and still seems to be: to uplift or to contain? An additional question is whether civilising offensives are based on consent or coercion. Based on a review of historiography and social science literature, I will first examine late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century attempts to ‘civilise’ the urban poor. Next, I will turn to the tragic case of Rotterdam outcasts, who following the Second World War were deported to camps elsewhere in the Netherlands. The municipal authorities and civil servants claimed they needed to be re-socialised. Lastly, I will deal with recent developments, focusing in particular on housing associations’ endeavours to subjugate tenants whose behaviour is (considered to be) extremely annoying to their social environment.

The Worker’s Dwelling: Seat of Evil, Target of Civilisation

In 1855, a committee of the Royal Institute of Engineers reported to King William III that the workman’s house was:

a place of terror for the highly civilised, where everything that is stacked and done defiles the air, where indecency has its cradle and where diseases originate and distribute their devastating influence to all estates into even the houses of the more civilised’ (Verslag 1855: 3–4).

The committee argued that the workers’ housing situation ought to be improved, a plea that sprang from a combination of social compassion and fear of physical and moral contagion in such quagmires of filth. [\[1\]](#) The efforts to improve this situation were part and parcel of a ‘civilising offensive’ in the Netherlands, a variegated attempt ‘to instil the “masses” with bourgeois values and standards. Tendencies to be lazy, to celebrate too merrily, or engage in “sinful” practices were to make way for virtue and respectability’ (Verrips 1987: 4).

In the late nineteenth century, rapid industrialisation and a growing proletariat exacerbated the problem of poverty and inadequate housing, particularly among those who depended on casual labour or who were unemployed and could not afford the rent of better-quality accommodation. The bourgeoisie feared that, in addition to social unrest, this might lead to contagious diseases – anxieties that were already expressed in the 1855 report quoted above. Efforts to alter the situation intensified. Although a vanguard of notables aimed to terminate miserable housing conditions, the poor’s unhygienic living conditions should be tackled not so much in order to materially and morally uplift the lowest social strata, but to protect the middle class bourgeoisie from being physically and visually affected. The ‘civilising offensive’ was launched not from altruistic motives, but from well-understood self-interest (de Regt 1984; Deben 1988). In 1890 and 1896, the *Maatschappij tot Nut van ’t Algemeen* (Society for the Public Benefit) published reports on the ‘housing issue’, which played an important role in the acceptance of the 1901 Housing Act (*Woningwet*). [\[2\]](#) This Act provided major cities with the tools to expand and improve housing. Significantly, it was accepted in the same year as the Public Health Act was passed. In turn, the legislation was part and parcel of the process of state and nation formation, which aimed at creating disciplined and homogenised subjects who sensed that they belonged to a national community (van Ginkel 1999).

Importantly, leaders of the labour class movement (Social Democratic Labour Party [SDAP] and various trade unions) also developed initiatives to materially and morally uplift their grassroots. In urban Holland, the SDAP turned into a political force to be reckoned with. In 1901, 12.5 per cent of the Amsterdam electorate voted SDAP, increasing to 27.2 per cent in 1909. In Rotterdam, these percentages were 6.9 per cent and 16.6 per cent, respectively, and in The Hague 5.1 per cent and 15.4 per cent. Clearly, social-democratic influence was on the rise. Housing was connected with social ideals, and housing associations with socialist roots mushroomed. An increasing number of housing estates with up-to-date accommodation were established. For example, between 1915 and 1930, Amsterdam built a hundred thousand new dwellings. Though this implied a vast improvement, there were also some unforeseen and unintended consequences. The workers' families with steady jobs and incomes moved to the newly built houses, while the unemployed or underemployed could not afford the rent and remained in the inner city's derelict neighbourhoods and dwellings. The upshot was a concentration of social problems in particular urban areas, where filthiness, vandalism, brawls, noisiness, neglect of children, alcoholism, prostitution and so on were rife. However, the grim view of inner city life was mitigated by a strong belief in the efficacy of control and malleability (Beekers 2012). The middle classes and labour leaders were convinced that they could teach people who were 'ill-adapted' and 'undisciplined' how to live properly – that is, how to live up to bourgeois standards.

To that end, municipalities and housing associations built *controlewoningen* or *woonscholen* (literally 'supervised accommodations' and 'living schools', respectively) and hired overseers whose task it was to continually check whether tenants had paid the rent, abided by the rules and lived up to the norms. The goal of this supervision was to 'discipline living'. With regard to the Amsterdam housing projects, the director of the Municipal Housing Service, Arie Keppler, stated in 1919 that it would be attempted 'to salvage whatever can be salvaged'. In his own version of the *Fremdzwang–Selbstzwang* dynamic, he expounded the view that the overseer's 'skilled and tactical performance' would have to externally enforce discipline (*tucht*), which should then 'gradually transform into inner discipline' (Keppler quoted in Dercksen and Verplanke 1997: 44). Although conduct reform was the stated goal, in practice a range of coercive measures increasingly ostracised many of the subjects who were targeted from mainstream society, particularly the poorest of the poor.

As Ali de Regt (1984) has shown in regard to Amsterdam, the overseers (usually females with a middle-class background) penetrated deeply into the tenants' private lives. They inspected whether the rent was paid in time and the house was well-kept, inventoried the nuclear family's social composition, informed on their physical and mental well-being and so on. They attempted to instil a bourgeois lifestyle and living ideal – including orderliness, cleanliness, domesticity and cosiness. Those who failed to live up to these norms, were deemed 'inadmissible' (*ontoelaatbaar*) or 'asocial' (*onmaatschappelijk*). They were excluded from access to ordinary accommodation (that is, better-quality dwellings for which a regular rent was required) and housed in special compounds. These included Asterdorp and Zeeburgerdorp in Amsterdam and Zomerhofin The Hague. Here, the tenants were supervised under a tight regime, which was facilitated by the compounds' architectural design (Vendrik 2011). They were kept away from the 'better' labour-class families, so that the latter would not be 'infected' or 'terrorised' by the former. Internally, the compounds had subtle ranking systems rewarding those who behaved well: they 'moved up' to higher class houses that had slightly more space. However, 'moving out' proved difficult. Surveillance was continual or appeared to be so, which was extremely important in exercising power over the compounds' tenants. Many felt imprisoned or at the very least stigmatised.

The rhetoric of 'civilisation' legitimised the practice, which in fact was utterly coercive. Those eligible for placement in a compound usually attempted to avoid it. In the late 1930s, there was growing contempt for and opposition to the regime of supervision by middle-class overseers. It was deemed to be undesired tutelage and charity. Most studies on the 'problem' seem to agree on this, whether it concerns Utrecht (van Well 1988,

1992), Rotterdam (Dercksen en Verplanke 1997) or The Hague (Kendrick 2011). The upper strata of the labour class had meanwhile adopted the bourgeois ‘civilised’ standards and felt they didn’t need supervision, while the lower strata felt unduly contained and constrained. Whereas organised labour attempted to emulate the middle classes, unorganised labour seemed to resist attempts at being civilised by either members of the middle classes or the assimilated labour class. This widened the distance between the upper (organised) and lower (unorganised) segments of the labour class, much as in any established–outsider figuration. The poorest of the poor lacked the economic, social and symbolic resources to emancipate themselves and claim a position in the ranks of the established labourers, while the latter drew sharp boundaries and socially and symbolically distinguished themselves from what they considered to be outcasts who were beyond help. The stigma of marginality possibly also led to a self-fulfilling prophecy that exacerbated or even created degraded conduct (see Acquaint 2008a: 117). As we shall see in the next section, the unskilled, unorganised and poor labourers’ predicament would continue for some considerable time to come.

Bombed and Deported: The Tragic Case of Rotterdam ‘Evacuees’

Rotterdam, the second largest city in the Netherlands, was heavily bombarded during the Second World War. [3].[#N3]The infamous German air strike of 14 May 1940 killed approximately 850 non-combatants. Less well known is the fact that Allied air bombardments throughout the war deprived even more Rotterdam citizens of their lives. In the 1940–1945 era, material damages were enormous and tens of thousands of inhabitants became homeless. Most of them had occupied cheap houses in the inner city and industrial neighbourhoods, which were hit particularly hard. To provide housing, the municipality built temporary wooden dwellings in seven neighbourhoods for the poorest of the poor, who had no social network or means to go elsewhere, or were unwelcome there. Largely due to the 1930s economic crisis, many shared a history of unemployment or underemployment, poverty, and alcoholism. The municipality’s civil servants deemed them asocial (Dercksen en Verplanke 1997; Racquets 2000). The goal of their concentration in neighbourhoods was that a team of social workers could exercise control over them and attempt to turn them into ‘decent’ citizens. In fact, however, being housed in one of the makeshift complexes meant further stigmatisation, while the quality of the dwellings proved so bad that those living there had to continually cope with cold, draughty and damp conditions. This applied to two sites in particular: Noorderkanaalweg and ‘Brabant village’. Mould began covering the interiors, creating an unhealthy environment. Scabies, fleas and lice were endemic. During the harsh 1944–1945 winter, people began burning planks to keep warm, thus gradually demolishing their own wooden dwellings. Civil servant J.H. Geijs attributed the neighbourhood’s destitute situation to its inhabitants’ character instead of to the poor physical conditions and the war. He regarded ‘asocial’ people as ‘muck’ and even a ‘societal cancer’ and he pleaded for coerced separation from ‘decent’ citizens (Dercksen en Verplanke 1997: 77). Non-compliance with the rules would result in permanent superintendence. At the time, ideas about war trauma and the psychological effects of displacement were still conspicuously lacking.

Soon after the liberation of the Netherlands and Rotterdam in early May 1945, Canadian soldiers visited the sites. In an inspection report about one of them, a Canadian army officer concluded: ‘Both the morals and the morale of the people was at very low ebb’ (quoted in Dercksen and Verplanke 1997: 77). On 13 July 1945, Dutch forces – aided by the Canadians – deported 28 nuclear families of ‘uncivil’ citizens to camps in the provinces of Drenthe and Overijssel. [4].[#N4]The municipal evacuation order, which lacked legal grounding, read that living accommodation in Rotterdam was currently unavailable to these families ‘due to bad habitation, emanating from unsocietal behaviours’ (quoted in Dercksen and Verplanke 1997: 79). Escorted by armed guards, they were forced to board Canadian army coaches, which transported them to a barracks camp.

There were nine such camps. A total of 350 Rotterdam nuclear families ended up there, often for many, many years. Re-socialisation programmes consisted of finding employment for the adult men, who were given only some spending money, teaching the adult females how to keep house, and sending children to school. Tight supervision prevailed, a form of power that attempted to fashion people into living up to ‘normality’ (see Foucault 1977). Although the initial plan was that the deportees would return to Rotterdam within two years or so, this did not work out because the local authorities were reluctant to accept them back again. They were glad that they had rid Rotterdam of these unwanted ‘profiteers’. Most families stayed in the camps for at least six years and several for nine years or even longer. The camps were closed only in 1959. Upon return to Rotterdam, the stigmatisation of being ‘asocial’ did not stop. On the contrary, people who had been detained in camps *after* the war were believed to have collaborated with the Nazi regime. Looking back in anger, the former ‘evacuees’ felt humiliated and deeply embittered for years to come. [5].[#N5]

Other so-called ‘socially weak’ (*zwaksociale*) families, who had not been sent to the Drenthe and Overijssel camps, but had remained in one of the Rotterdam camps, were slightly better off. More than 500 families were concentrated in ‘Brabant village’. As in the case of the camps, the fear of ‘contagion’ reigned supreme among Rotterdam’s ‘civilised citizens’. It was believed that the socially weak had no place in ‘ordinary’ society lest it be infected by them. In 1947, it dawned upon policymakers that these outcasts should be assisted financially and socially and that this assistance should be accepted voluntarily. Soon thereafter, the work of ‘uplifting’ began. It implied meddling in the affairs of the ‘socially weak’, who despite the rhetoric of voluntarism had little choice but to accept the deal. An efficacious threat was that if parents did not accept the ‘offer’, their children would be sent to an institution. Like those who were sent to camps elsewhere, the inhabitants of the Rotterdam camps experienced their stigmatisation as a debasement.

What such enforced relocation did was add spatial stigma to social stigma, with all the negative social consequences that go along with territorial stigmatisation, including public disgrace, prejudice and discrimination from without and weakening of social ties and anomie from within (Acquaint 2008a: 117). The stigma proved to be ‘one more obstacle on the path to socioeconomic integration and civic participation’ (ibid.). In practice, uplifting in the camps came to nothing. Brabant village was gradually demolished between 1957 and 1965. In hindsight, many deemed the project a complete failure. Clearly, the times they were a-changin’, although *onmaatschappelijkheidsbestrijding* – that is, battling anti-social behaviour – still went on for some considerable time. However, extreme forms of ‘othering’ that fenced off people from taking part in ordinary life seemed to be a thing of the past, for the moment at least. As I will explain below, a new generation of social scientists and social workers – and in their wake civil servants – wanted to avoid stigmatisation and exclusion of unruly lower class people.

Was the Rotterdam case exceptional? In its practical implications it was, but in its ideological grounding it certainly was not. In the immediate post-war era, moral panics reigned supreme in the Netherlands. Intellectual leaders from all walks of life pointed out that five years of war and occupation had left a moral scar on society. Conditions such as exposure to war violence, social disruption and social dislocation, famine, collaboration, sexual licentiousness, ‘lying and cheating for the good cause’ and so on had had a negative impact on public morality and decency. It was believed that many Dutch citizens needed to be re-civilised, re-colonised and re-nationalised (see van Ginkel 1999, 2004). Such efforts were aimed at ‘mass people’ – meaning the lower classes in general – and in particular at lower-class youth. They were believed to be ‘demoralised’ and ‘degenerated’ nihilists or even – as was remarked during a conference on the future of ‘Dutch civilisation’ – ‘a sick spot in our society’ and a ‘danger for Dutch health and Dutch culture’ (Algra et al. 1946: 205). These socio-pathological views echo convictions like those expressed by Rotterdam civil servant Geijs a few years earlier. ‘Mental health care’ was considered to be crucial for the reconstruction of Dutch society and the development of bourgeois virtues such as industriousness, tidiness, orderliness, frugality, a

steady and cosy family life and so on. The worst cases of deviance needed to be institutionalised and re-educated.

However, despite widespread support among the political, religious and cultural elites, these civilising missions or rather combating asocial behaviour (*onmaatschappelijkheidsbestrijding*) – that were heavily influenced by ideas circulating in the moral re-armament movement – proved unsuccessful. This does not mean, though, that they petered out rather soon. But it was the vast majority of labour-class families themselves that opted for the ‘road to enlightenment’, a road that was not paved by bourgeois tutelage but by their own organisations. As early as 1953, Rotterdam’s head of social housing concluded: ‘The workers have swapped their proletarian lifestyle for a “bourgeois” lifestyle’ (quoted in de Lange 1995: 126). In other words, through self-emancipation large segments of the labour class were bourgeoisifying rapidly.

Nonetheless, between 1955 and 1965, several municipalities continued to build houses for those who in their view did not adapt well to middle-class behavioural standards and needed to be guided and overseen. An army of professionals meddled in the lives of ‘asocial’ people (*onmaatschappelijken*). Gradually, however, sociologists and social workers began redefining the latter as people who lacked opportunities (*kansarmen*), particularly when employment, affluence and welfare began increasing rapidly in the 1960s. For example, Herman Milikowski argued that rack-rent landlords and failing managers were the real *onmaatschappelijken*. In his view, ‘the issue of *onmaatschappelijkheid* is still viewed with the eyes of the substantial citizen who regards society as *his* society and his vision as *the* vision’ (Milikowski 1961: 187). In other words, middle-class convictions and conventions were believed to be the yardstick of normality. This new view soon gained support. Terms like ‘asocial’ and ‘inadmissible’ started to disappear from policy and scholarly papers. Perhaps this linguistic tabooing is itself a signal of the civilising process with its increased levels of embarrassment and shame, but the avoidance was short-lived. Henceforth, the situation of ill-adapted people was often attributed to psychological and social problems rather than a pathological character structure.

Repulsion and Fascination

For some time, the political climate in the Netherlands seemed to be based on more tolerance towards the socially weak who behaved in a deviant manner. Coercion was considered taboo and made way for ‘softer’ policies. However, it proved to be a temporary change of direction. As of the mid-1990s, old ideas about governing the socially weak and banning them to the margins of society resurfaced. It was believed that shipping containers could provide adequate living quarters for people who were a nuisance to their physical and social environment, in particular to their neighbours. The first ones appeared on the initiative of a local Labour Party politician in the town of Kampen. They were situated on an industrial site, accidentally dubbed Haatland (Hateland), so that their inhabitants could do little harm to their neighbours. ‘Harm-reduction’ was in fact the major goal. The shipping containers and so-called *Skaevhuse* (following a Danish example) were also introduced elsewhere. Soon the names *hufferhut*, *hufferwoning* and *asowoning* (the equivalent of British Labour MP Frank Field’s ‘sin bins’) percolated. [6][#N6]The Populist Party PVV introduced the term *tuigdorp* (‘trash village’) in 2011. It was elected ‘word of the year’ in a competition the Van Dale dictionary organised on its website.

History seemed to repeat itself. The idea of banishing people to the urban margins as a last resort for (predominantly male) individuals who proved to be a persistent problem for their neighbours quickly became popular again. These individuals, who often suffered from multiple financial, psychiatric and alcohol- or drug-related problems, were kept under tight surveillance. Initially, housing associations were optimistic. Even the ‘asocial’ were said to be happy in their shipping containers, because they bothered no-one and they had more

leeway to behave as they liked. However, director Gurbe Helbig of Delta Wonen, the Kampen housing association that introduced the shipping containers as accommodation for those who were deemed unfit to live in an urban environment, had to admit that the idea was a failure. ‘You isolate people and that’s not the right direction,’ he said. At the same time, though, he surmised that those who had been offered such a containers to live in were unduly recompensed for misbehaving: ‘They have a nice house with a small plot of land. They don’t want to leave at all’. [7],[#N7]. He was of the opinion that the shipping containers should provide a temporary not a permanent solution.

Managers of other housing associations (*woningcorporaties*) were less ‘understanding’. Beverwijk’s Woon op Maat director John van Nimwegen put it rather bluntly: ‘Those asocial people really don’t give a shit about anything’ (*Die asociale hebben werkelijk schijt aan alles*). ‘We dub the six tenants who are able but unwilling to adapt *hufters*. We’ll build them accommodation with the appearance of a normal house, but with the frame of a bunker so that they cannot demolish anything.’ [8],[#N8]. The accommodation would be situated out of the view of the ‘ordinary’ citizenry sight and a wall around the garden prevented sight of the tenants’ garbage. The ideas and the practice were meanwhile not exceptional at all. Whereas in the late nineteenth and the entire twentieth century at least a thin veneer of well-intended ‘civilisation effort’ and ‘enlightenment ideals’ had covered up what amounted to excluding and marginalising specific categories of the poor, most housing associations were quite transparent about their policy to get rid of those who offended bourgeois living norms. They euphemistically called them Extremely Problematic Tenants, who in fact usually received unemployment-related benefits, indeed proved a menace to their social environment, and often terrorised the neighbourhood. The media published many a horror story about the phenomenon. National and local political parties began backing the housing associations. This is about maintaining order and controlling people who behave in (extremely) deviant ways, not about socially reintegrating or uplifting them. This does not mean that such attempts were completely lacking. In September 2001, the Rotterdam department of the Labour Party suggested teaching people with ‘deviant living behaviour’ how to use their house ‘properly’. The suggestion weakly echoed the earlier policy of interventionism in housing. In general, however, attempts to educate asocial tenants in how to live properly have made way for social exclusion and physical marginalisation tout court. Plans to build *Skaevhuse* have become very popular in many municipalities. The only problems preventing their realisation are their relative expense and the obstacles presented by the NIMBY (not in my backyard) principle: the established will not let these outsiders live anywhere near their neighbourhood, not even on rather isolated sites.

People who behave in a manner that is deemed uncivil or transgressive are thus relegated to the societal periphery. At the same time, however, ‘ordinary’ citizens are very curious about how ‘asocial’ others are living. The dynamic of ‘othering and selfing’ is familiar: *they* are what *we* are not and we should keep them at a distance. But abhorrence of otherness also leads to fantasies about these others that in turn trigger curiosity, albeit through the safety of a screen. Ever since television spread to the masses, there were characters that explored and exploited this role. Examples are *Stiefbeen en zoon* (the Dutch version of *Steptoe and Son*) and *Swiebertje* – or the adventures of a charming bum. Both series were highly popular in the 1960s and early 1970s. [9],[#N9]. Later on, successors included the boozing type ‘Dirk’ in the comedy *Van Kooten en De Bie* (as of 1989) and the fortunes of the Flodder Family (first movie *Flodder*, 1986, with sequels in 1992 and 1995 as well as a popular TV series broadcast in 62 parts in the 1990s). These folk heroes sprouted from the imaginations of scriptwriters, but there was also a larger-than-life reality version based on the vicissitudes of Gerrie Ruijngaart, his ex-wife Hanna Tokkie and their children. Initially, ‘the Tokkies’ – as they were dubbed – were the protagonists in two 2004 documentaries on ‘extremely problematic tenants’. Almost overnight, the word ‘Tokkie’ became synonymous with an asocial person. For a few years, the Tokkies turned into seemingly popular media personalities, but in reality they were ridiculed and despised. Without going into further detail,

the important point is that characters such as the ones mentioned above – whether actors or people playing themselves – became rather popular and attracted many viewers. This gaze had nothing to do with empathy for people at the lower rungs of the social ladder, but everything to do with voyeurism that served a function: teaching viewers lessons about how *not* to behave and how *not* to end up; the kind of distancing that reaffirms and buttresses who *we*, ‘the normal people’, are.

Conclusions

Successful civilising offensives were usually those aimed at a particular segment of the labour class; ‘respectable’ workers and their families who wanted to emancipate themselves and who to some considerable extent emulated and adopted bourgeois behavioural standards. Moving up in the world – that is, in the direction of middle-class life – required mimicking middle-class behavioural standards and conventions. There was hardly any need to change behaviour through external force as skilled workers were well-aware of the value of education and other forms of enlightenment. The labour movement’s twin goals were material progress and moral uplifting through self-organisation and self-emancipation. Skilled and organised workers therefore needed no push from middle-class civilisers, because the latter preached to the converted and the former had their own organisations that pursued their members’ enlightenment: ‘What is dubbed the disciplining of the labour class was the workers’ elite’s own choice for enlightenment and civilisation to which they themselves wished to actively contribute’ (Smit 2010: 171; also see van Ginkel 2001: 12–13). In doing so, they sustained and reinforced the disciplining techniques of the middle classes and the extant power structures and social order, but it emanated from the motive of well-understood self-interest and was based on consent. Whether civilising offensives were dominated by consent or coercion would therefore seem to depend on the specific configuration of power relations. Although disciplining missions always demanded some coercive measures, they often took the shape of self-disciplining projects in the case of organised and skilled labour.

It was the unorganised and unskilled lower class in particular that faced being contained rather than uplifted. In the successful emancipation process of the Dutch labour class, led by a labour class ‘aristocracy’ that was functionally close to the middle-class reformers, those who failed to jump on the bandwagon found themselves increasingly isolated. Unorganised, unskilled and disconnected, the latter became not only increasingly isolated, but also stigmatised, particularly so if their behaviour did not live up to bourgeois standards and conventions adopted by upwardly mobile workers. The labour elite – the skilled workers and their organisations’ leaders – distanced themselves from these ‘asocial’ people or colluded with the middle-class bourgeoisie to expel them to society’s physical and social periphery. Ever growing segments of the labour class deemed the ‘uncontrolled’ and ‘unrespectable’ behaviour of ever smaller circles of the proletariat unacceptable and reprehensible. As a corollary of the civilising process, their sensitivity towards rude behaviour was heightened. The labour class – and, alluding to Karl Marx, particularly the labour class for itself (*für sich*) – had ironically almost entirely become bourgeois instead of class-conscious. It shows the importance of social integration, social cohesion and social control, sometimes combined with the forceful hand of the law (see, for instance, van Ginkel 1996). Through social-democratic and confessional organisations (or pillars – *zuilen*), the lower classes’ drive towards socio-economic improvement gained a huge fillip. Along with it went the will to mimic bourgeois behavioural standards. With the rise of the welfare state and growing post-war affluence, this was achieved in large measure – although class distinctions never disappeared (see Bourdieu 1984). Importantly, the civilising offensive was to a large extent launched not from *without*, but from *within*. It is a classic instance of hegemony, with the balance of coercion and consent tilting towards the latter.

However, for the unruly lower strata of the labour class and the unemployed, pure coercion was usually more often applied than consent and perhaps sometimes more effectively. Something seemed to change, though, when a number of social scientists in the 1960s began arguing against using coercive measures in civilising offensives. But following a brief interlude, when attitudes towards the socially weak were more understanding, harsher approaches returned in full force. If you currently fail to adapt to middle-class conventions and convictions, you are extremely vulnerable to social interventionism. If you behave in a loud manner and make a mess in the public – or even in the private – domain, give offence to the bourgeoisie and the ‘bourgeoisified’ labour class in other ways and perhaps indulge in petty crime, you run the risk of being sent to camps or scum-proof shipping containers where you are literally excluded from society. The unruly underclass is conscious of the fact that the road to improvement is littered with so many obstacles as to make it an unfeasible trajectory to get ahead. Particularly when they find themselves stigmatised to the extent that it proves hardly possible to escape from social entrapment, they may lose their dignity and sense of self. Eventually, they become a menace to their social and spatial environment and to themselves. Tragically, the stigma and negative representations produce ‘the very cultural anomie and social atomism that these representations claim were already there’ (Wacquant 2008a: 116).

Marking them as ‘uncivilised’ ostracised the unruly from civil society. In fact, any hope for the efficacy of a civilising offensive is abandoned and the only strategy deemed feasible is to constrain or to contain those segments of the lower classes that do not abide by the behavioural standards originally emanating from the middle classes – in some cases literally, as when people are forced to live in shipping containers secluded from urban or suburban neighbourhoods. They are denigrated as an inferior and repugnant species and are thus dehumanised, making a shameless contemptuous gaze unproblematic. [10],[#N10]. Being labelled as ‘an urban purgatory closes off alternative diagnoses and facilitates the implementation of policies of removal, dispersal, or punitive containment’ (Wacquant 2013: 7).

So where does this lead us with regard to the usefulness of the ‘civilising offensive’ concept? Though it does have a certain appeal because it is roughly indicative of socio-cultural processes involving *Fremdzwang* and *Selbstzwang*, the concept is perhaps too imprecise and too normative to be useful analytically. The normative dimension is partly due to the fact that the term has been appropriated and contaminated by some politicians, social analysts, opinion leaders and policymakers who began using it not as a tool for sociological analysis, but as a policy instrument and remedy: they believed a ‘civilising offensive’ was *needed* (Powell 2013). Besides, the notion of ‘civil’ is of course value-loaded. To some extent, I have to plead guilty, though. I have loosely used the concept of civilising offensive or civilising mission in several publications myself (van Ginkel 1991, 1996, 2001). More importantly, the concept insufficiently distinguishes between consent and coercion. Civilising offensives may to a large extent be consensual if they are based on self-disciplining to achieve social mobility and self-enlightenment. On closer inspection, however, even the self-civilising efforts of the ‘bourgeois’ labour class are part and parcel of the power system that Foucault captured in the word ‘disciplining’. Coercion therefore always accompanies civilising offensives. Subtle incentives to conform to what in the power/knowledge system is considered ‘normality’ reward types of behaviour that live up to these norms. The coercion may not be overt, but it is certainly present and to some extent matched by persuasion and consent, making for a condition of hegemony. However, for the unruliest segments of the lower classes, the balance is clearly tilted towards coercion. We therefore need to take into account the tension between coercion and consent when applying the concept of civilising offensive.

What we have at hand in the case histories I sketched is Foucault’s ‘objectification of the subject’ through dividing practices, scientific classification and subjectification (Foucault 1971; see also Heller 1996). On the consent-coercion continuum, the civilising offensive aimed at those who are ill-adapted to bourgeois behavioural standards is obviously at the coercive end. It is mainly based on *Fremdzwang*, force emanating

from outside a social figuration aimed at altering the conduct of individuals. It may lead to *Selbstzwang*, either in the short run or in the long run, but most scholars using the concept of ‘civilising offensive’ merely look at time-spans of years or decades not centuries. The insight of the *Fremdzwang–Selbstzwang* dynamic continues to be useful, but less so if we dogmatically regard it as a ‘blind’ long-term process. In the final analysis, certain segments of the lower classes are contained – and often constrained – through sheer power and coercion. At a generic level, the result may be assimilation to conventions of civility in the *longue durée*, but then we turn a blind eye to the perfidy of what it means and does in the short run: to stigmatise people who are ill-adapted to middle-class behavioural standards; to separate and ‘invisibilise’ them through dispersal or concentration in reserved spaces and to thus exclude them from taking part in ordinary life. [11] [N11]. They are abandoned by the established labour class (the ‘us’) that in a hegemonic fashion treats ‘them’ as outsiders to create, widen or maintain social distance while at the same time attempting to close the gap with the middle class. While in the wider figuration the power balance between the (lower) middle class and the organised labour class may have decreased, this is certainly not the case between skilled ‘bourgeoisified’ workers and the unruly underclass that is consequently turned into society’s ultimate negative internal Other.

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Notes

1. For a general description of the conditions in poverty-stricken nineteenth-century Dutch urban neighbourhoods, see van der Woud (2010). ♣ [N1-pt1]
2. On the Maatschappij tot Nut van ’t Algemeen and its civilising offensive, see Kruithof (1980 and 2015, this issue). ♣ [N2-pt1]
3. This section is mainly based on Dercksen and Verplanke (1997); Rackwitsz (2000); Maandag and van der Mee (2005) and the documentary *Toen zij uit Rotterdam vertrokken*, VPRO, broadcast 13 March 2013. ♣ [N3-pt1]
4. The original idea of these camps dated back to the establishment of colonies by the Maatschappij van Weldadigheid (Benevolent Society) in the early 1810s. ♣ [N4-pt1]
5. This is particularly evident in the TV documentary *Toen zij uit Rotterdam vertrokken*, VPRO, broadcast 13 March 2013. ♣ [N5-pt1]
6. *Hufter* has a very negative connotation and would translate as an extremely boorish person. *Asowoning* means house for an aso (the abbreviated form of asocial). The Danish words *Skaevehuse* literally mean ‘unusual houses’. ♣ [N6-pt1]
7. *Trouw*, 20 January 2007. ♣ [N7-pt1]
8. Quoted in Robert van de Griend (2005) *Huizen voor hufters. Moeilijke huurders. Vrij Nederland*, 15 January 2005. ♣ [N8-pt1]
9. They have predecessors – older cinema heroes and novel characters situated in poor urban neighbourhoods; they were not particularly civilised but they had ‘hearts of gold’. ♣ [N9-pt1]
10. In this connection, Elias would perhaps speak of *Augenlust*. ♣ [N10-pt1]

11. For similar processes in the black American ghetto, analysed from a figurational sociological perspective, see Wacquant (2004). Also see Wacquant (2008b: 203). [↗\[#N11-ptri\]](#)

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Biography

Rob van Ginkel is an Associate Professor at the Department of Anthropology, University of Amsterdam. His academic interests are in the field of history and anthropology, maritime cultures, European ethnology and

the ethnography of the Netherlands, national culture and identity, commemoration and memorials. His publications include several books and scores of articles in edited volumes and national and international journals.

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