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**The Making of a New Sexual Morality in the Early  
Socialist Labour Movement in Amsterdam**

Written for the workshop 'Free Love and the Labour Movement'  
Second workshop in the series 'Socialism and Sexuality'  
International Institute of Social History  
Amsterdam, 6 October 2000

International Institute of Social History  
Amsterdam  
2001

During the second half of the nineteenth century the socialist labour movement in Amsterdam was formed through a series of long, protracted processes. The result was a compromise between long-standing traditions of violent social protest by the urban poor and newly imported socialist ideas and symbols, trade-unionism and political action. The period between 1890 and the turn of the century marked the end of the formative phase of the socialist movement in Amsterdam. In 1894 a bitter struggle between parliamentary social-democrats and revolutionary anarchists signaled the end of the unified socialist force that afterwards became known as the 'old movement'.<sup>1</sup>

The final decade of the nineteenth century was also the period in which a distinct set of socialist moral values concerning decency and sexuality came to the fore. Biographical research into the life and works of socialist grass-roots militants who addressed these issues sheds new light on how the attitudes, orientations and ways of life of the Amsterdam poor directly influenced the content and manifestation of socialist convictions. There is reason to suspect that the socialist moral standards about sexuality, presented as an intellectual conviction and as something entirely new, modern and revolutionary, were in fact largely descriptions and justifications of the way the lower strata of the working class lived their lives.

### **1848**

The first group of workers in Amsterdam that would form a socialist organisation consisted of migrant artisans from Germany, who in 1847 constituted a local branch of the London-based *Bund der Kommunisten*. Some members of this small circle of socialist cabinet-makers, tailors and shoemakers lived together, with their respective wives and children, in a communal household in the Pijlsteeg, just behind the Dam Square in the old city centre. This 'communist' address, where daily work, family life and political meetings all took place under the same roof, was notable not only for its multiple, mixed functionality and as the first bastion of international socialism in the Netherlands, but also because it was located on the border of the seamy part of town still known as the 'red light district'. This neighbourhood was (and is) inhabited by a substratum of the working class: a *Lumpenproletariat* of casual labourers and permanently unemployed, petty criminals and prostitutes.

The Amsterdam branch of the *Bund der Kommunisten* made its first and final appearance in the public sphere with a demonstration of the unemployed on 24 March 1848. What the communist artisans probably planned as a disciplined march focused on particular social and political demands turned into a full scale riot, as the Amsterdam poor reverted to their own, time-honoured methods of collective action: breaking windows and looting houses and shops along the canals where the rich and powerful lived. In the following days the municipal police force managed to arrest 32 of the culprits. The majority of those arrested was youngsters from the alleys and back streets surrounding the communist stronghold in the Pijlsteeg. Further research into their family backgrounds revealed that almost all had been raised by single mothers who worked as cleaning women or street vendors. Some of them had been married but were widowed and others had been

<sup>1</sup> This paper is based upon research for my Ph.D. thesis: *Waarachtige Volksvrienden. De vroege socialistische beweging in Amsterdam, 1848-1894*. Amsterdam, 2001, in which the development of the local socialist movement during its formative stages is investigated as a process of mutual assimilation of local traditions of collective protest and new forms of organization and politics.

abandoned by their husbands or had never been married at all. Interestingly, many of the sisters of those arrested in the Dam square riots of 1848 did not seem to conform to the norms of decent, middle-class family-life either: they co-habited with men without being married, and others had illegitimate children while still residing in their mother's home.<sup>2</sup>

After 1848 the Amsterdam branch of the *Bund der Kommunisten* would refrain from further public actions, but its members continued living and working together in the Pijlsteeg, among their 'immoral' neighbours. In the years to come some of these German socialist artisans would marry women from the surrounding slums and alleys, often taking custody of their wives' illegitimate children.

The first action set the pattern for the coming decades. The small but growing minority of socialist workers in Amsterdam would – at least until the end of the century – continue its close personal contact with the 'immoral' substratum. The official history of socialism, written from the start by active participants who had every reason to stress the high moral standards of their following, does not include, and even conceals the fact that an important section within the first generations of local activists maintained a doubtful life style with respect to family and sexual relations.

## 1886

By 1886 a full-blown socialist labour movement had developed in the Netherlands from the remains of the Amsterdam branch of the First International. Yet Amsterdam remained the most important stronghold of the national *Sociaal-Democratische Bond* (Social-Democratic League). Bitter struggles with the municipal police ensued from socialist attempts to acquire a position in the public arena in the city. Most notable were the serious riots that occurred in July 1886. These riots, which became known as the *Palingoproer* (eel riots), developed from a non-political incident in which police broke up a street carnival in the slum quarter of the Jordaan. As the Jordaan also happened to be the neighbourhood in which the overwhelming majority of the Amsterdam socialists lived, many of their followers became involved in the street fighting that would last for two days and result in 26 dead and many seriously injured.

Police inquiries showed that a large proportion of the known male participants had already earned a doubtful reputation for being drunkards, living apart from their wives and children or for using public violence on a more or less regular basis. Another important category of offenders included the dead, wounded or arrested participants who had been previously registered by the police as regular visitors to socialist meetings. Most noteworthy was that in many instances these two very distinct categories overlapped.<sup>3</sup>

Two examples may suffice. The 41-year old cigar maker, Johannes Penning, who died of bullet wounds on the second day of the *Palingoproer*, had come to the

<sup>2</sup> Gemeentearchief Amsterdam (municipal archive Amsterdam, GAA), *Wekelijks verslag der stedelijke bijzonderheden aan B&W door de Directeur der Politie, 1848, 28 maart en 4 april*; P.M. Nolthenius en B.J. Ploos van Amstel, *Verslag van de gebeurtenissen voorgevallen te Amsterdam op 24 Maart 1848, en kort overzicht van het regtsgeeding daarop gevolgd*. Amsterdam (G.J.A. Beijerinck), 1848. From these two sources the names of the arrested and accused were taken, further research into their social and domestic background was done in the registry archives of the municipal archive (Archief Bevolkingsregister; Archief Burgerlijke Stand).

<sup>3</sup> GAA, Coll. Tijdschriften 1886, B(1886)4.4. Staat van personen die gekwetst zijn op den 26e Julij 1886.

Jordaan quarter from his home at the *Bierkaai*, probably the most ill-reputed slum of the city. Bordering on the Pijlsteeg, where the communists of 1848 had dwelled, the inhabitants of the *Bierkaai* were notorious for their criminal conduct, moral corruption and violent behaviour.<sup>4</sup> Cigar maker Penning proved himself worthy of the reputation of his environment. Police records not only qualified him as a 'bad character', constant instigator of street brawls and a heavy drinker, but also as a regular attendant at socialist meetings. Jan Beuning, another victim of the *Palingoproer*, had a similar record. He was known to be 'a major drunkard and living apart from his wife for 12 years', but 'a regular visitor of the social-democratic assemblies' as well. His somewhat loose style of life did not prevent the almost 50-year old Jan Beuning from climbing a barricade under a hailstorm of bullets (a very serious act) and then dying with a red banner in his hands.

In this period the moral standard of socialist women was not very different from their male counterparts among the rank and file of the movement. In 1885 the police investigated the background of a woman who was known as a leader of the bands of unemployed that demonstrated the distress of the poor daily along the canals where the rich lived. This public annoyance was the initiative of a woman who lived as 'concubine' (*bijzit*) of the reputed socialist De Ligt. Although she was not married to him, she used the name De Ligt as her own. As 'Burgeres (citizen) De Ligt' she would become famous as the founder of the first association of socialist women in Amsterdam *Door Vereeniging Verbetering* (Improvement by Unification). When some socialists raised doubts and began to question the necessity of a separate league for women, 'concubine' De Ligt proudly replied to her male party comrades that all members of her organisation were 'solid' or 'decent' (*degelijk*) women.<sup>5</sup>

The demarcation between the community of socialist partisans and that of the 'bastard-prone sub society' comprised of notorious drunkards, street fighters and unwed mothers was ambiguous for a long time. There is even evidence of occasional traffic between the world of class-conscious militants and that of prostitutes.

Around 1890 the young Amsterdam worker C.G. Tieman was held in high esteem by his comrades as one of those heroes who took to the streets to sell the socialist paper. Socialist street vendors like Tieman were constantly harassed, and were often forced to fight off attacks from the public or police trying to arrest them. As with many of his colleagues, Tieman ended up in prison, thereby confirming the reputation he had gained. After being released from prison, Tieman started a socialist bookshop, but it did not flourish. Soon after the shop opened, Tieman's firstborn son died at the tender age of five months, and his wife started advertising in the party press for work as a seamstress. Adversities mounted, and at the end of 1892 Tieman was ousted from the movement for stealing party funds. Three years later the Amsterdam police informed the mayor that Tieman no longer sold revolutionary printed matter, but that he had now turned to prostituting his wife.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> In modern Dutch 'Fighting against the Bierkaai' still is proverbial for taking up a fight against an invincible enemy. Joh.C. Daan, *Hij zeit wat! Grepen uit de Amsterdamse volkstaal*. Amsterdam, 1949. pp. 13, 39.

<sup>5</sup> GAA, Politiearchief (PA), Dossier Palingoproer, 'Aanteekeningen betreffende sociaal-democratische bewegingen', f. 1, 6, 9; Fia Dieteren en Ingrid Peeterman, *Vrije vrouwen of werkmansvrouwen? Vrouwen in de Sociaal-Democratische Bond (1879-1894)*. Utrecht, 1984. p. 26

<sup>6</sup> IISG, Archief SDB, Notulenboek afd. Amsterdam, 24 november, 9, 16 en 30 december 1892, 19 mei 1893; *Recht voor Allen*, 18 augustus 1892, 4; Idem, 23 augustus 1892, 4; Idem, 24 september 1892, 4; GAA, PA, Corr. M 1896, nr. 168.

Stories such as that of the Tieman family were not restricted to the lowest ranks of the movement. The first Dutch translation of Karl Marx's *Wages, Price and Profit* [1865] appeared as late as 1898, published by the firm of D. Buys Dzn, who up to that time had been primarily engaged in distributing pornographic literature.<sup>7</sup>

### **Revolutionary morals and traditional practices**

In 1894 the two wings of the socialist labour movement of Amsterdam parted ways, when a small but growing minority of the parliamentary social-democrats founded their own party, and the 'old movement' became more closely allied with anarchism. Among the Amsterdam workers this conflict was more about style, attitudes and behaviour than about ideological or strategic questions. The former comrades identified their colleagues' political orientation by their language, dress and haircut. In short, reformists wore stiff collars and hats on their closely cropped hair. They spoke about 'scientific' socialism in proper Dutch. In sharp contrast, the revolutionary socialists and anarchists wore their hair much longer, their shirts open and sported cloth caps. Their revolutionary rhetoric was cast in a typical Amsterdam dialect.

In the process of developing different styles of political attitudes, moral and sexual issues also became a political topic. In the revolutionary press young comrades now announced their explicitly 'free marriage' or the birth of their child with special emphasis on the fact that their baby was born out of wedlock.<sup>8</sup>

The new ideological interest in free love and sexual issues is also apparent in two pamphlets, written in 1896 and 1897 by the radical socialist R.A. Oosterhout. For more than a decade he had been writing revolutionary pamphlets against colonialism, the Dutch royal family, against the violent character of the Amsterdam police force and many other topics. Ten years after the start of his career as an independent agitator, Oosterhout developed a sudden interest in issues of love, sex and morality.

The title of one of his pamphlets was in itself an insult to moral standards, for it frankly questioned: *Is prostitution really immoral? (Is de prostitutie wel zoo onzedelijk?)*.<sup>9</sup> Before answering the question, Oosterhout stated that women, like men, needed sex, that they had 'warm blood in their veins'. For this reason the bourgeois 'marriage de raison' was an unnatural, immoral contract that denied the call of nature and made financial considerations a substitute for sexual attraction. Women from the civilised classes didn't marry the man they wanted, but the one who could best fulfill their social and financial aspirations.

In contrast, prostitutes were, according to Oosterhout, far less immoral than bourgeois women. Because of their open and honest conduct in sexual matters, their way of life was more in accordance with human nature. As long as they had pleasure with at least some of their customers and they did not fake orgasms, the sexual attitude of a prostitute was of a higher moral standard than that of decent but utterly unhappy bourgeois women. A prostitute has sex for money, just like the wife of a capitalist, but at least she doesn't make things worse by swearing oaths

<sup>7</sup> Hans Goedkoop, *Geluk. Het leven van Herman Heijermans*. Amsterdam / Antwerpen, 1996. pp. 151-152; Karl Marx, *Loon, prijs en winst. Voordracht gehouden in den Algemeenen Raad der 'Internationale' op 26 Juni 1865*. Vertaling van J.F. Ankersmit. Amsterdam (D. Buys Dzn.) 1898.

<sup>8</sup> Dieteren en Peeterman, *Vrije vrouwen*, pp. 63-67.

<sup>9</sup> R.A. Oosterhout, *Is de prostitutie wel zoo onzedelijk? Een zedenstudie*. Amsterdam (Joh.J. Lodewijk) z.j. [1897].

of loyalty and pretending to love.

In a second pamphlet, *Justice for the illegitimate child! (Recht voor het onechte kind!)*, Oosterhout expanded this 'Darwinist' argument to children born out of wedlock.<sup>10</sup> They were, in his view, the best things to happen to the human race. Because they were the fruits of 'genuine, hot passion' and sexual attraction, they were bound to be strong, healthy human beings, like all children from the working classes. Their fathers and mothers had had sex because they felt like it and not out of social or economic considerations. As a result illegitimate children – like working-class children in general – grew up to be strong and healthy human beings, even under the worst conditions, whereas the sons and daughters of the civilised classes had to be gently nursed and fed, and needed long vacations in the open air just to stay alive and reach adulthood.

At the turn of the century free love had become an anarchist principle. Its relation to the accepted life style among the lower strata of the Amsterdam working-classes of living together without benefit of a marriage license was more direct than might appear at first sight. The new principle seems to a large extent to have been the result of personal every-day experience with working-class militants.

Oosterhout, for example, wrote the pamphlet that called for justice for the illegitimate child after he had started living in free love with a woman who had already borne three illegitimate children. This Mechteld Fijth, who had herself been an illegitimate child, had lived together over the years with different men, and each of her children had a different father. When she and Oosterhout started living together, two of her children (a boy of nine and a girl of eleven) moved in with her. The third child was only seven at the time, and she remained with an elderly couple, probably her father's parents. The suspected father of the child had been living with Mechteld Fijth and her three children for a couple of years, while active as one of the most prominent streetfighters in the Amsterdam socialist movement. During the *Palingoproer* for instance, this Piet Meegens was at the forefront everywhere police were attacked and molested. Eventually Meegens was sent to prison to serve a lengthy sentence, leaving the child behind with his parents. Mechteld Fijth took her other two children with her and moved in with Oosterhout. Four weeks later she gave birth to her fourth child. Oosterhout knew perfectly well what he was writing about, when he made sexual morals the issue of his pamphlets. After all, he was still officially married to a Danish woman whom he had left some fifteen years earlier.<sup>11</sup>

## Conclusion

Among the Amsterdam socialists, free love became an openly debated and 'ideological' issue in the last decade of the nineteenth century. Before that, in the formative phase of the movement, between 1848 and 1890, free love was certainly an important phenomenon among Amsterdam workers, but it was more a fact of life than part of the political or ideological agenda of the labour movement. The fragmentary, inarticulate and often 'hidden' character of information about the

<sup>10</sup> R.A. Oosterhout, *Recht voor het onechte kind! Bijdrage tot de kwestie van het onderzoek naar het vaderschap*. Amsterdam (W.B. Moransard), z.j. [1896].

<sup>11</sup> This story is based on research in the registry archives, entries concerning Fijth, Oosterhout and Meegens in: GAA, Arch. Burgerlijke Stand; Arch. Bevolkingsregister.

'immoral' aspects of the lives of grassroots militants may only reflect the non-ideological, social or traditional origins of free love among the socialist workers Amsterdam.

Nevertheless, development of a new sexual morality in the early socialist labour movement at the turn of the century did not endure. Only a small minority of anarchists took up the banner of free love as an important issue. Modern social-democracy concentrated more and more exclusively on the 'real' and all-important issues of the socialist labour movement: gaining higher wages, shorter hours and more political influence for its parliamentary representatives. Openly debating sexual matters and claiming the right to a distinct set of proletarian morals could only hamper this strategy, and therefore it became discredited.