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Waarachtige volksvrienden. De vroege socialistische beweging in Amsterdam, 1848-1894

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SUMMARY

Dennis Bos, *True friends of the people. The early socialist movement in Amsterdam, 1848-1894.*

This book describes the origins and early development of the socialist labour movement in the city of Amsterdam during the second half of the nineteenth century. Though the historical literature on socialism in the Netherlands is rich and extensive, this early period has largely been neglected. At best it was treated as a less-fortunate prelude to the 'modern' movement of 'scientific' social democracy that would emerge just before the start of the twentieth century. A small group of parliamentary socialists, who had been trying unsuccessfully to win the revolutionarily inclined 'old movement' for their more pragmatic reformism, founded their own party in 1894. In later years, when they had become the dominant current within Dutch socialism, these parliamentary socialists also managed to put their stamp on the historical image of their predecessors. Consequently, the early socialist movement of the period between 1848 and 1894 was often depicted as a collection of silly dreamers, quick-tempered radicals and hot-headed youngsters, lacking in political determination, ideological clarity and organisational strength and destined to achieve nothing. The fact remains however, that this motley crew of casual labourers, rebellious youngsters and philosophically inclined craftsmen succeeded in constituting their own socialist labour movement. They did so, moreover, at a time when socialist politics were 1/m, even within the working-class itself, far from generally accepted or even tolerated, and were in fact considered by most to be outlandish, highly indecent and dangerous.

This study aims at formulating new answers to an old question: what made the first generations of working-class militants in Amsterdam turn to socialism? It does so by dissociating from the above-mentioned schematic images of the 'old movement' and by trying to understand the traditions, mentalities, social and geographical structures that influenced the patterns of recruitment of early socialism.

Part I is entirely dedicated to the turbulent year 1848. The revolutionary high tide that threatened to sweep the continent was reflected in Amsterdam by riots

that lasted no longer than one afternoon in March. The police-investigations that followed revealed two significant aspects of this city-riot. First, the social background of the arrested offenders, their behaviour during the disturbances and the course of action they took were all highly in accordance with the time-honoured traditions of rioting in the city. Secondly, and more surprising, the involvement of a group of immigrant German craftsmen was discovered. They turned out to be members of the Amsterdam branch of a league of communists that had its headquarters in London and had just published a Manifesto, calling for the workers of all countries to unite and cast off their chains.

Part II covers the two decades between 1848 and 1868, and opens with a chapter that describes the 'afterlife' of the Amsterdam branch of the German communists. Though their organisation was dismantled and they ceased all public action, their group remained intact. This can be seen from the municipal archive documents concerning addresses, marriage and birth; proof that the members of the late communist league stayed closely in touch. At the same time they developed social contacts with some Amsterdam workers, who in these years found their own ways of expressing discontent. The remaining chapters of part II analyse three distinct forms of social protest and working-class organisation. A rather informally organised group of pamphleteers, calling themselves 'waarachtige volksvrienden' or 'true friends of the people', tried to make themselves spokesmen of the tradition of 'social bargaining by riot'. A new phenomenon was the emergence of the first trade unions around 1865. The local freethinkers-union 'de Dageraad' (Dawn), in which former communists, 'friends of the people' and trade unionists were all present, performed a highly important role as mediator.

Part III and IV describe the public and intimate history of the Amsterdam branch of the International Workingmen's Association (1868-1874), and of the Dutch Sociaal-Democratische Bond (Social Democratic League, 1878-1894). In both periods, a formal socialist organisation, lines of communication with socialists abroad and a rudimentary form of ideological consensus seemed to exist. In day-to-day reality however, other factors proved far more important in binding together the Amsterdam members of both these organisations. The formal structures of the organisation were bypassed in significance by the social networks of kinship, neighbourhood and workplace wherein socialists held position. Whether an Amsterdam worker was to become a socialist or not depended largely on the social network to which he or she was connected. Certain workplaces, neighbourhoods and families generated the overwhelming majority of the movement's constituency. At the same time, other circles (such as the city's Jewish proletariat) remained immune to the rallying call of socialism.

The slum-quarter of the 'Jordaan', a large neighbourhood at the western outskirts of the city, quickly became the stronghold of the movement. The inhabitants of the Jordaan, traditionally the place where city-riots would originate made their sense of 'natural justice' and their preference for 'direct action' an

important part of the repertoire of the local socialist movement. On the whole, large city-riots, like the ones in 1876 against the abolition of the yearly fair (a sort of carnival) and in Juli 1886 – when 26 people died at the hands of the military, were from now on conducted with the involvement of local socialist activists. The concentration of socialists in the Jordaan became a self-accumulating process, even more so from 1885 onward, when the police succeeded in precluding socialist meetings outside the Jordaan. After that, the two large socialist meeting halls in the Jordaan would become the cradle of a distinct subculture: a curious mixture of cosmopolitan socialist symbols and traditional Amsterdam virtues, such as explicit impudence and the provocative display of irreverence for authorities. In the halls the Amsterdam socialists not only held their meetings, but sang their own songs, had their drinks, took collections for unfortunate comrades and relatives, read their papers together and made bold plans for glorious days to come. Being a socialist in those days certainly had its pleasurable aspects.

Finally, Part v analyses the end of the 'old movement' in Amsterdam. The movement was affected by a set of structural changes in its surroundings. First of all a new socialist International was organised, in which the Marxist Germans quickly gained the upper hand. The emphasis that German social democrats put on party-discipline and political uniformity proved irreconcilable with the mentality that prevailed among the Amsterdam socialists. In Dutch politics, a new group of left-wing liberals and social reformers joined hands to improve the living conditions of the working class, both by political means and by concrete social projects among the poor first and foremost those poor living in the Jordaan. In doing so they seemed to gainsay the socialist slogans condemning all non-socialists as a single reactionary force. At the same time, the geographical isolation of the Jordaan-quarter diminished because of the filling up of canals, the construction of new bridges and a tramway-line.

At first these developments promised new opportunities for recruitment. From the Jordaan, street vendors now took the party paper and socialist brochures to the eastern quarters of the city, where a large community of Jewish workers lived. After 1892 the first contingent of Jewish workers indeed joined the Amsterdam socialist movement. But their sudden appearance within the long-established circle of non-Jewish socialist was not unproblematic. The party-press and minutes of branch meetings in these years display the existence of anti-Semitic sentiment among the membership from the Jordaan. On the other hand, the new recruits from the Jewish quarter also showed a strong tendency to keep to themselves. They founded a separate organisation, had their own café, a special monthly magazine, separate meetings and a library.

In 1893, a parliamentary opposition made itself heard within the SDB, aiming to reform the Dutch socialist labour movement to standards that were set by the highly successful German social democrats. In the Amsterdam branch, their spokesmen, coming from other parts of the city or even the northern provinces of the country, were easily isolated and cast out. They shared their marginality

and isolation, however, with the group of Jewish socialists. This would prove to be of major significance. When in 1894 the parliamentary SDAP was founded, its Amsterdam branch was to be largely dominated by Jewish workers. Of those who had constituted the socialist labour movement in the western parts of town for half a century, no more than a handful were to join the new party.

The emergence of a 'modern', i.e. parliamentary and reformist, social-democratic movement was in full accordance with the social and political climate at the turn of the century. Social legislation, reform and the broadening of suffrage seemed to create opportunities for socialist action within the existing political realm. At the same time however, this important development marked the end of an era in which working-class socialists had been able to build their own autonomous world. Left to its own devices, the 'old movement' may have been ineffective in strict political terms. But as a social world in which workers could develop their own self-esteem and mentalities, cultural forms and networks of mutual assistance, the early socialist movement in Amsterdam was a rare success.



