

***'Lifeboat on the ocean of Society'******Ideas and practices of the ragged school in England and The Netherlands, 1850-1920***

In the nineteenth century, the idea was widely spread that poverty not only results from poor people's socio-economic circumstances, but also and particularly from their flaws in character. Moreover, the unemployed, demoralised, criminal poor were seen as a threat to Victorian Enlightened society. For this reason they were called the 'dangerous class' or 'residuum'. The latter term referred to the idea that poor people were falling behind in the march of development and progression. The middleclass answered these social problems by a 'civilising offensive'. One aspect of this was offering poor children education, in order to fix their flaws in character. For example, in early nineteenth-century England, Christians began founding ragged schools, which were established to take care of poor and roaming children. In The Netherlands, a few decades later, similar institutions were established, which were referred to by the term 'havelooze school', a translation of 'ragged school'. The founders of both the English and Dutch schools were, in some way or another, related to the 'Réveil'. This international movement was primarily concerned with reviving Christian thought, social care and evangelisation.

In this thesis I have aimed to answer the question: *What was the socio-cultural meaning of the ragged school?* I have concentrated on five aspects analysing the meaning of these schools to: society, the children participating, their parents, the middleclass and the women who were involved in some of the schools' daily routines. Little research has been conducted on the Dutch ragged schools. Therefore, to answer the question as formulated above, I have studied source materials of the 'havelooze school' in the municipal archives of Rotterdam and Utrecht. In addition, as a frame of reference to better analyse the Dutch variant, I have also studied a selection of primary and secondary sources of the English ragged schools. In this thesis I have concentrated on the specific characteristics of the ragged school. Thus, potential differences between English and Dutch ragged schools have not been taken into account.

The primary function of ragged schools in England and The Netherlands was to improve society. These schools operated as a lifeboat for poor children, offering them education. While all of them were poor, children from many different backgrounds attended ragged schools. Not only children whose parents had insufficient funds were welcomed, but also children who had been expelled from other schools. Ragged schools had special teams visiting poor families, not only offering children free education, but also food and even new clothes. By providing ragged children with new opportunities and keeping them off the streets, founders of such schools hoped that juvenile delinquency would decrease. In addition, since founders were often inspired by Christianity, ragged schools tried to protect poor children from committing sins. Hence, the Bible was used as a basis; children were taught that conscience and behaviour should be informed by Scripture. This idea differed from the liberal

view on education, which was based on the notion of the rational individual, thinking and acting autonomously.”?

While the term ‘civilising offensive’ implies that the subjects of the offensive undergo this process passively, practices in ragged schools do not confirm this idea. For example, instead of focussing solely on their schoolwork, children used the school as a place to meet and set up gangs for thievery. They used the school for their own purposes. Many new pupils who had not resorted to criminal activities in the past, learned to steal and became a member of a gang. The ‘habitus’ of the ‘raggeds’, a concept of Pierre Bourdieu, can explain such differences in behaviour of the same individual at different places. While on the streets, the children lived in a different culture than their teachers: a different ‘habitus’, with different rules, a different hierarchy and a different education level. At school the children were taught to behave according to the ‘habitus’ of their civilisers.

The ‘civilising offensive’ of the school was not only directed at the ragged children, but also at their parents. For example, some schools published their own magazines, targeted at both children and parents. Furthermore, some children changed their parents themselves, by showing good behaviour at home. Thus, the image of the ragged child could take different forms. For instance, the child could be depicted as a danger to society, but also as an innocent victim of his environment. The ragged child could even become a hero when he did not resort to criminal activities, while his schoolmates did. Such a heroic child could set an example or be a helping-hand for others. This tension between the ‘romantic child’ and the wicked, unrestrained, ‘bad’ child was also present in the representation of the ‘raggeds’ in novels, pictures and school reports.

The middle-class referred to the ragged children by the term ‘street Arabs’. The middle-class depicted the ragged children as the complete opposite of themselves, as immigrants living in Victorian society, but not behaving that way. The middle-class thought of the raggeds as having a different culture, different rules and a different hierarchy. It goes without saying that the middle-class used the term ‘street Arabs’ to label these children as inferior: it was used as a stigma. The middle-class regarded themselves and their culture as being superior. This idea gave them the authority to spread their culture and impose it on the lower classes. In addition, it gave the middle-class the opportunity to define and confirm their culture, which was not only related to their class, but also to their Christian background. Thus, as stated above, evangelisation was an important part of education in the ragged schools. The definition of ragged children by the middle-class as their counterpart, relates to Edward Said’s idea that the development and maintenance of a culture always involves the construction of an ‘alter ego’. This ‘alter ego’ is often defined in terms of contrasts.

Women played an important role in the ragged schools. This is noteworthy, because men were dominant in the public sphere at that time. The activities of these women can be interpreted from the perspective of evangelical feminism. Because women were no longer regarded as sinners, but instead as excellent Christians, they were given the opportunity to participate in society. Thanks to qualities like patience and self-sacrifice, which were seen as women’s natural characteristics, they were able to

enter, often new, areas of the public sphere. The notion of society as one family matched with the idea of these women taking on their duty as a mother to take care of others. Woman used the 'civilising offensive' not only as a weapon, but also as a shield. It allowed them to distinguish them from women and men of lower classes and protect their middle-class identity.