

WORKING-CLASS SAVING IN THE NETHERLANDS, 1910-1935

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When did working-class saving become a serious matter in the Netherlands? This question has been on my mind since the day I started to take an interest in Dutch budget inquiries. As a research worker in a recently formed museum that's partly about financial cultures, I'm collecting household account books of private persons. Once I began studying these documents, I felt the need to explore the field of scientific budget research. After that, the first item I reproduced on a library's copying machine was a booklet from 1913.¹ The document gives the results of a study into the expenditures of seventy working-class families from all over the country. It was published by a think tank of the Social Democratic Workers' Party. In the publication these party intellectuals stressed the importance of budget research. According to them, it could help to assess whether working-class people were in a position to put aside money.²

Here a hot issue was touched upon. The question whether the working-class was in a position to put aside money at the time generated discord among Dutch members of Parliament. A war of words was fought on an Old Age Pension Bill.³ The social-democrats pleaded for a state financed pension system. This would mean that the working-class wouldn't have to contribute in the costs. Their right-wing opponents, especially the representatives of the denominational parties, were strongly against such a system. They thought it quite normal for the workers to contribute in the costs. The roman-catholics, for instance, never got tired of stressing that Dutch workers could easily manage to save money for their old age. The problem, however, was that working-class people could make savings but they wouldn't, because of their spendthrift character.⁴ According to the social-democrats, the workers simply were too poor to put aside money for long-term goals. They would if they could, but they couldn't.

At the beginning of 1911 the social-democratic point of view was put forward in their party's newspaper:

¹ *Arbeidersbudgets. Jaarbudgets van zeventig arbeidersgezinnen in Nederland. Rapport eener enquête der Sociaal-Democratische Studie-Club te Amsterdam* (Amsterdam 1913).

² *Arbeidersbudgets*, 3.

³ Actually it was an Old Age and Invalidity Pension Bill in one. Old age was seen as a form of invalidity. I.J. Brugmans, *Paardekracht en mensenmacht. Sociaal-economische geschiedenis van Nederland 1795-1940* (2nd impression; The Hague 1976) 415.

⁴ 'Katholiek-sociale week', *Het Volk*, September 8th 1911.

Why do we offer resistance against contribution [of workers in the cost of a pension system]? It's because, as a rule, the wages of working men are insufficient to save for old age. This view is not contrary to the fact, that working men actually do save, that a lot of workers are depositors in a savings-bank. For working-class saving doesn't come down to a lasting deposit of a surplus of the earnings, that, year after year remains in a savings-bank until the moment arrives when earnings come to an end. Saving by working men always is a temporary matter. Workers put aside money, knowing that they soon will have to use it for urgent needs, for things that require a bigger expenditure at once, for things than can happen every day [...]. The purchase of a bigger piece of furniture or of clothes; the upbringing of the children; sickness or unemployment – it all makes savings melt away long before old age makes itself felt. [...] Indeed, savings are part of many working-class budgets, but the budgets themselves keep the workers from saving for old age and even from contributing in the cost of a pension system.⁵

Although the social-democrats admitted to the fact that a lot of workers managed to save, however small the amounts were, they also made it their business to tell the world that many workers weren't able to make savings at all. In the 1913 booklet the party intellectuals made sure to publish quotations from letters they received from men and women taking part in the inquiries into the expenditures. Working-class conditions are very hard indeed – that's the message. In parliamentary debates the social-democrats could cash in on that.

A letterwriter remarked:

I have a so-called steady job; never a day of absence; my wages were raised regularly these passed few years, and in my profession I'm not one of the poor devils; nor did we have the bad luck of getting ill or something of the kind. And yet, in spite of all this, *we never managed to save a penny* [the italics are mine, GB]. Thrift and economy only gave us life on a subsistence-level. Now, we've reached the point that, when calamities strike, we'll soon have to appeal to others for help. Some relieve we'll get from the union, but that won't be enough to keep away dire poverty.⁶

This stuff fascinated me. Having read the 1913 booklet and quite a few articles in the social-democrats' newspaper of the time, I promised myself to write my dissertation about working-class saving in the Netherlands. How did working-class saving emerge here and how did it evolve over time?

The book will deal with the period 1870-1970. (In this paper, though, my focus will be on the years before 1940.) Data gathering will take place in the cities of Amsterdam and The Hague. Besides, I will visit the archives in regions where large concentrations of agricultural labourers were to be found. In doing so, I hope to keep the book from falling short on empirical findings.

⁵ 'De sociale verzekering', *Het Volk*, March 18th 1911.

⁶ *Arbeidersbudgets*, 102. See also: 'Arbeiderszorgen', *Het Volk*, March 22nd 1913.

But in the book I'll move on a theoretical level as well. (This paper, however, hardly touches upon theory.) My main concern will be to see in how far changes in working-class saving behaviour can be analysed adequately in terms of Norbert Elias's civilization theory.

Only recently I started visiting the Amsterdam Municipal Archive. In this paper I will show what I found out there about the popularity of saving by means of boxes in Amsterdam in the decades before World War II. I think it's likely that saving by means of boxes was a form of working-class saving.

Several historians have been interested in the topic of working-class saving in the Netherlands.⁷ This isn't the right moment for calling them all in front of us. For the time being, however, one exception must be made.

1. A weighty question

Among the historians I referred to is Mrs. Elles Bulder. In 1998 Bulder published a worth reading essay on saving through a savings-bank in the Netherlands.⁸ Her focus is on the years 1881-1940. It is her empirical-based view that during this period most of the depositors in a savings-bank were working-class people.⁹ What were they saving for? Falling short on empirical evidence here, Bulder assumes that the depositors mostly made savings to fulfil short-term needs. To be able to bridge periods of financial stringency seems to have been the most important motive underlying saving behaviour.¹⁰ Secondary to that, working-class people saved in order to maintain a certain level of socially sanctioned behaviour. An example of this motive was the ambition to

⁷ In chronological order: R.H. van der Voort, *Sparen in de 19e eeuw. Onderzoek naar de werking van de Nutsspaarbank te 's-Gravenhage en de Leidsche Spaarbank* (Master's thesis Economic History University Leiden, Leiden 1987); R.H. van der Voort and L.A. van Heijningen, *Sparen in de negentiende eeuw* (The Hague 1988); Elles Bulder, 'Working-class saving behaviour and old age in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Netherlands', *Tinbergen Institute Research Bulletin* 3 (1991) 3, 259-270; R.H. van der Voort, 'Sparen 1800-1890' in: J. van Gerwen and M.H.D. van Leeuwen ed., *Studies over zekerheidsarrangementen. Risico's, risicobestrijding en verzekeringen in Nederland vanaf de Middeleeuwen* (Amsterdam and The Hague 1998) 450-465; Elles Bulder, 'Sparen 1881-1940' in: J. van Gerwen and M.H.D. van Leeuwen ed., *Studies over zekerheidsarrangementen. Risico's, risicobestrijding en verzekeringen in Nederland vanaf de Middeleeuwen* (Amsterdam and The Hague 1998) 694-706; Joost van Genabeek, *Met vereende kracht risico's verzacht. De plaats van onderlinge hulp binnen de negentiende-eeuwse particuliere regelingen van sociale zekerheid* (Amsterdam 1999); Jacques van Gerwen, *De ontluikende verzorgingsstaat: overheid, vakbonden, werkgevers, ziekenfondsen en verzekeringsmaatschappijen 1890-1945* (The Hague and Amsterdam 2000); Marco H.D. van Leeuwen, *De eenheidsstaat: onderlinges, armenzorg en commerciële verzekeraars 1800-1890* (The Hague and Amsterdam 2000); Joost Dankers, Jos van der Linden and Jozef Vos, *Spaarbanken in Nederland. Ideeën en organisatie, 1817-1990* (Amsterdam 2001).

⁸ Elles Bulder, 'Sparen 1881-1940' in: J. van Gerwen and M.H.D. van Leeuwen ed., *Studies over zekerheidsarrangementen. Risico's, risicobestrijding en verzekeringen in Nederland vanaf de Middeleeuwen* (Amsterdam and The Hague 1998) 694-706.

⁹ Bulder, 'Sparen', 705.

¹⁰ Ibidem. See also: Elles Bulder, 'Working-class saving behaviour and old age in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Netherlands', *Tinbergen Institute Research Bulletin* 3 (1991) 3, 261.

possess a Sunday suit.¹¹ The amounts working-class people brought in were small. In periods when money was tight they soon were used up.¹²

Although Bulder certainly sharpens our insight into working-class saving in the Netherlands, she leaves a wheifty question untouched. Most of the depositors were working-class people – that's all very well. But how many working-class people were depositors? Furthermore, Bulder almost completely seems to lack the notion that for getting a sound grasp of working-class saving it is necessary to take a close look at changes in working-class economic well-being. It is a well-known fact that after World War I working-class people in the Netherlands had better times coming. Towards the end of the nineteen-twenties the average working man's purchasing power was twenty-five percent higher than before WW I.¹³ What was the effect of this increase in economic well-being? Did saving through a savings-bank become considerably more widespread in the working-class than it had been in harder times? Or, to put it in another way, did the number of workers that became depositors grow significantly? In my dissertation this question won't be overlooked. And in this paper neither.

Did the increase in economic well-being effect working-class saving in the sense that the number of workers who became depositors in a savings-bank grew significantly? That – to be as precise as possible – is the question I devote my attention to. Looking for a beginning of the answer, I studied part of the archive of the Amsterdam Savings Bank.¹⁴ In what follows, I present the results of my investigation.

These results concern a peculiar form of saving in the period 1910-1935, the saving of families using home savings-boxes they got from the Amsterdam Savings Bank. Section 3 of the paper deals with it in particular. I will argue that the families who deposited money by means of these boxes belonged to the working-class. Furthermore, the increase in popularity of this form of saving in the decades before World War II has my attention. In section 4 the paper is given the finishing touch. But first of all, of course, section 2, which is about changes in working-class economic well-being.

2. Changes in working-class economic well-being

After World War I working-class people in the Netherlands had better times coming – that's what I said a while ago. Let's see if this is somewhere near the truth. To begin with: I'd like to move back in time a little bit. Let's look at some of the oldest working-class budgets that have survived. In

¹¹ Bulder, 'Sparen', 704. See also: Bulder, 'Working-class saving behaviour', 261.

¹² Bulder, 'Sparen', 700, 706.

¹³ B. Bölger, 'De welstand van de arbeidersklasse in Nederland. Voordracht, gehouden in de vergadering van de Afdeeling voor Technische Economie van het Kon. Instituut van Ingenieurs op 18 Juni, 1927 te 's-Gravenhage', *De Ingenieur*, March 10th 1928, T.16; 'Loonen en loonsverhoudingen in Nederland. Het Ned. loonpeil aan de spits. 25 pCt hooger dan vóór den oorlog', *Het Vaderland*, June 7th 1929.

¹⁴ Amsterdam Municipal Archive (AMA), no. 1431.

doing so, we learn that round 1850 food constituted more than half of the family expenditures. The food expenditure percentage approximately amounted to 58.¹⁵ This means, that the working-class families of the time really were poor.¹⁶ After the rent had been paid, little was left over to pursue the fulfilment of other needs. There could be no thinking of putting aside money for future use.

Economic hard times lasted into the early 1870's. Then things started to change. In the decades to follow working-class financial circumstances grew a bit brighter. By the time it was 1910 working-class people's disposable income had risen to the extent that no longer more than half of it was spent on food. The average working-class family was not as poor as it had been in 1850. Let me put it more accurately: in sixty years' time the food expenditure percentage had dropped from 58 to 48 (in the Dutch cities, that is; in the country, so far, it had refused to go under fifty).¹⁷ The decrease in poverty went hand in hand with an increase in working-class people's ability to put aside money: quite a few already had a savings-account at the savings-bank, as even the Dutch social-democrats had to admit.

In 1910 the world was only four years away from the Great War, that jeopardized working-class economic well-being. In Table 1 we can see how – at least in Amsterdam – towards the end of the war the food expenditure percentage was above fifty again.¹⁸

Table 1
Group of Amsterdam working-class families: their budgets in 1917–1922
compared with similar budgets in 1910-11, 1923-24, and 1934-35

Percentages of total expenditures									
	4 weeks of 1910-11	march 1917	march 1918	dec 1918	march 1919	march 1920	march 1922	4 weeks of 1923-24	4 weeks of 1934-35
Food	47.2	53.1	53.8	55.1	54.9	50.6	51.2	45.3	38.5
Clothes, shoes	12.4	6.6	9.0	7.7	8.2	18.5	12.0	9.5	7.2
House-rent	16.1	14.2	12.0	10.9	10.3	7.1	9.2	11.6	18.1
Light, fuel	6.3	8.4	8.1	5.8	7.6	6.0	6.8	6.6	5.2
Other	18.0	17.7	17.1	20.5	19.0	17.8	20.8	27.0	31.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
N =	23	32	31	27	32	23	22	15	15

¹⁵ Jan Luiten van Zanden and Arthur van Riel, *Nederland 1780-1914. Staat, instituties en economische ontwikkeling* (Amsterdam 2000) 355.

¹⁶ The poorer a family is the greater the proportion of total expenditure on food – this is the law formulated by the German-born statistician Ernst Engel (1821-1896).

¹⁷ Van Zanden and Van Riel, *Nederland*, 355.

¹⁸ This table is borrowed from Van der Goot: Willemien Hendrika van der Goot, *De besteding van het inkomen. Het indexcijfer van de kosten van levensonderhoud* (The Hague 1930), Statistical appendices, Table E. See p. 93 of the book for more details on Table E. The 1934-'35 data were added by me. The figures rely upon the budgets no. 4, 19, 37, 43, 46, 66, 92, 115, 119, 133, 154, 181, 192, 208 and 246 in *Inkomsten, uitgaven, verbruik en physiologische waarde van de voeding van 184 gezinnen uit verschillende kringen der bevolking gedurende de periode 1 Maart 1934–28 Februari 1935*. Bureau van Statistiek der Gemeente Amsterdam (Amsterdam 1941).

Once more using the food expenditure percentage as a measure of economic well-being, we see things getting a whole lot better after the beginning of the 1920's. That marked a real turn of the tiding. The percentage dropped from 51 in 1922 to 38 in 1935. Working-class people were going to be better off than ever before. What effect did the economic good times have on the working-class propensity to save? This question gives me the opportunity to present what I found out about saving by means of boxes in Amsterdam.

3. Saving by means of boxes in Amsterdam, 1910-1935

In 1907 the Amsterdam Savings Bank started distributing home savings-boxes.¹⁹ I will enlarge upon this in a little while. First, a few general remarks on the Amsterdam Savings Bank. The Amsterdam Savings Bank had been established in 1848. It was one of the two really noteworthy institutions facilitating saving in the national capital of Holland, the other one being the 'Rijkspostspaarbank' (RPS).²⁰

During the years under study the Amsterdam Savings Bank went through a process of growth. At the beginning of the period the bank consisted of a head-office and six area-offices. At the end of the period fifteen area-offices were operating. Four of the nine new area-offices had been established in the second part of 1920's.²¹ Three of these four were operating in real working-class quarters.

In 1907 home savings-boxes weren't a new thing. Their origin was American, and Czech and Norwegian savings-banks already had proved them to be successful tools for saving too. These boxes even weren't a new thing in the Netherlands: in 1906 a savings-bank in the city of Groningen had started distributing them.²²

When introducing the boxes, the Amsterdam Savings Bank had the smallest of savers in mind, people who wanted to be in the position to let the very small amounts they were putting aside grow to a bigger amount without them having to visit a bank-office all the time. The boxes were rented for free. The savings-bank held the key. The boxes were opened at the bank-offices. Their contents were added to the corresponding savings-books.²³

What was the social position of the Amsterdam inhabitants who put this form of saving into practice? Available data strongly suggest that they were working-class people. It's a fact that round about 1910 working-class people already were savers at the Amsterdam Savings Bank. At that time the savings-bank itself was eager to get a clear picture of the persons who started depositing money. In the Annual Reports on 1910 and 1911 tables were published, based on the

¹⁹ Amsterdam Savings Bank Annual Report 1907 (Amsterdam 1908). Amsterdam Municipal Archive (AMA), no. 1431: 251.

²⁰ The RPS was the National Savings Bank. Established in 1881 after the British example, it was attached to the post-office.

²¹ M.H. Verrijn Stuart, *Spaarbank voor de Stad Amsterdam 1848-1948* (Amsterdam 1948), Appendix 9. In the Annual Reports the years 1925-1930 are marked as successful: Amsterdam Savings Bank Annual Reports 1925-1930 (Amsterdam 1926-1931). AMA, no. 1431: 253-254.

²² Verrijn Stuart, *Spaarbank*, 76.

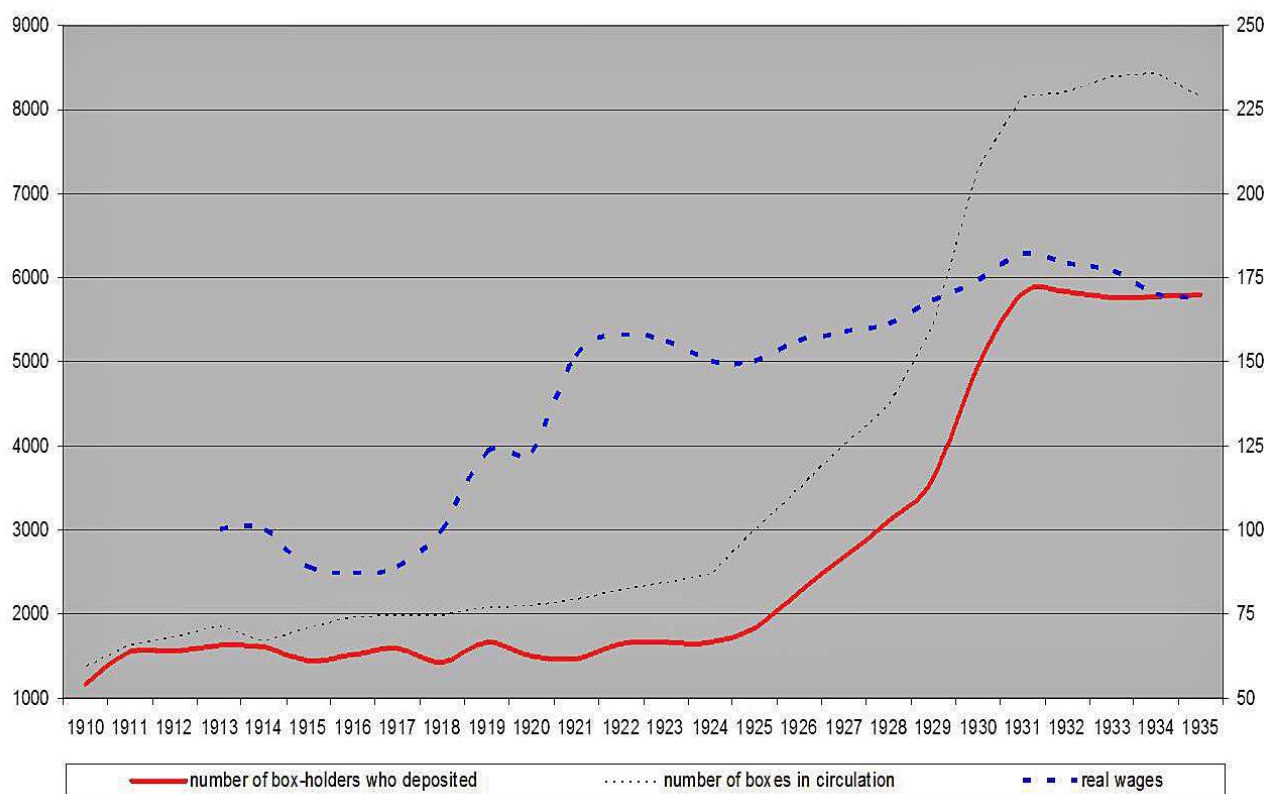
²³ *Ibidem*.

banks' administration and a recent occupational census.²⁴ From them we learn that in both years the percentage of persons belonging to the working-class among the new depositors approximately amounted to sixty.

In the Annual Reports that followed, information of similar kind failed to come. Yet, there is no reason to believe the picture changed in later years. And it simply cannot be imagined that when the bank-managers spoke of 'the smallest of the banks' savers' they were referring to persons other than these belonging to the working-class.

From now on, then, saving by means of home savings-boxes is marked as a form of working-class saving. Was it any popular? O yes, it certainly was. And its popularity tended to grow over time, as we can see in the following graph.²⁵

Amsterdam Savings Bank: saving with home savings-boxes, 1910-1935



For the time being, the thick red line is the one we want to look at. It represents the number of box-holders who in the years 1910-1935 actually deposited money in the Amsterdam Savings

²⁴ Amsterdam Savings Bank Annual Reports 1910-1911 (Amsterdam 1911-1912). AMA, no. 1431: 252.

²⁵ This graph is based on figures from: Amsterdam Savings Bank Annual Reports 1910-1939 (Amsterdam 1911-1940). AMA, no. 1431: 252-254.

Bank. If one thing catches the eye, it is the line steeply sloping upwards with regard to the second part of the 1920's. Up to 1926 the number of box-holders who actually deposited never was above 2000. And then in five years' time their number almost trippled. The second part of the 1920's also was the time that the real wages in the Netherlands had a strong tendency to grow. I think, we can safely assume an empirical correlation. That there indeed is such a correlation, becomes the more clear when we look at the graph again, in which the real wages line is included too (in blue).

The conclusion is permitted that in the second part of the 1920's saving became considerably more widespread in the working-class. 'At least in Amsterdam,' I make haste to add. Whether the conclusion holds water as regards to the Netherlands in general, remains to be seen. A lot of research still has to be undertaken.

Once again: working-class saving was – relatively spoken – booming in Amsterdam in the second part of the 1920's. Working-class people certainly had not kept away from the savings-bank in foregoing years, but it needed a substantial increase in economic well-being to make the number of active depositors grow significantly, to make working-class saving a real serious matter.

4. To conclude

'Do their budgets permit working-class people to save?' On the 20th of February, 1913 this question was raised by a Dutch member of Parliament. The House of Commons was debating on the Old Age Pension Bill mentioned on the first page of this paper. The MP was a social-democrat, a politician with an unpronounceable name (for those who are not from Holland): Duys. In this last section of the paper I'd like to dwell on this man's performance in the parliamentary debate. In doing so, I'll have the change to return to the social-democrats' point of view on the theme 'workers and their ability/willingness to save'.

Duys's answer to his own question was a clear 'No'. He said he new his opponents were of another opinion:

In the roman-catholic periodical *Voorhoede* a lady said workers surely were able to save. Working-class women simply had to put aside five cents a week. Then they'd have fl. 18.20 a year and fl. 182 in ten years. That was a fair sum for bad days ahead. But a mother of a family from the northern part of the Netherlands told the lady in a next issue that with fl. 9 a week, the usual pay in the northern part, it was out of the question to save a penny.²⁶

Duys must have known that quite a few workers at the time actually already were savers. But it was politically expedient to him to point at the many who weren't that fortunate. Working-class people were too poor to save – that was the message that came in the most handy.

No doubt, Duys's speech pleased his political associates. The roman-catholic lady Duys was referring to must have been a joke in social-democratic circles. She wanted to educate working-class people, stimulate thrift among them. Educators like that could count on a strong dosis of social-democratic aversion.²⁷ There were better things to do. A class-struggle had to be fought against a treacherous enemy that prevented the workers from getting higher wages. That struggle was all that mattered. As soon as it was successful, workers automatically would become savers.

Roman-catholic politicians thought otherwise. In their circles the conservative image of man was predominant. Workers are of a spendthrift nature. The one who thinks that working-class people – as soon as they are better off – will start to save of their own accord, is a stargazer. They only will be savers if they get educated to have a thrifty lifestyle.

²⁶ 'Kamerkroniek. Vergadering van 20 Februari. Invaliditeits- en ouderdomsverzekering', *Het Volk*, February 21st 1913.

²⁷ 'De katholieke huismoeder', *Het Volk*, April 9th 1911.

This point of view was put forward in a lecture by the roman-catholic member of Parliament Koolen.²⁸ The lecture was held in 1911, during the celebration of the twentieth anniversary of Pope Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum*. This encyclical letter urged statesmen and employers to stimulate working-class saving.²⁹ Its authority in roman-catholic circles, of course, was unchallenged.

So the roman-catholic MP had his doubts about the working-class's willingness to put aside money for future use. Ten years after Koolen's lecture the Tilburgian correspondent of the roman-catholic daily *Het Centrum* had his doubts too:

It came to our attention that in this here town public drunkenness increases. It's hard to say what the cause is. But it would be annoying if it was on account of the working-class's higher wages. Don't working-class people know how to deal with money? It looks that way. Their lack of thrift suggests they're careless for the future. If all this is true, actions for higher wages better remain in abeyance. We hope the police to adopt stern measures.³⁰

In this last section of the paper two points of view were compared one against another. Now I'd like to present them in a somewhat paraphrased way.

In the eyes of the social-democrats an increase in economic well-being was a sufficient precondition for working-class saving to grow. Working-class people didn't have to undergo a change in their culture. The roman-catholics said 'Sorry, but they *do* need a change of culture'. An increased economic well-being will only help if working-class people can be persuaded to confirm to values that originally weren't theirs. If this can't be done, an increase in economic well-being only leads to more dissoluteness.

Which of the two views is the most in accordance with the facts? I think, my empirical findings seduce me to take the social-democrats' side. Working-class saving, in the twentieth century never totally missing, soon became widespread when the economic good times came. If the Dutch working-class has ever undergone a change of culture it must have been before 1900.

The controversy between social-democrats and roman-catholics, as described in this paper, must have had counterparts in other countries. I haven't looked into that matter yet. So I'm open for suggestions.

²⁸ 'Katholiek-sociale week', *Het Volk*, September 8th 1911.

²⁹ 'Van nieuwe dingen... die uitbleven!', *Het Volk*, May 15th 1911.

³⁰ 'Plaatselijke berichten', *Het Centrum*, March 10th 1920.

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