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Living Strategies of Twente Textile Workers ca. 1920

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Lex Heerma van Voss and Floris Vermeulen

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International Institute of Social History
Cruquiusweg 31
1019 AT Amsterdam
Netherlands
Tel. +31.20.6685866
Fax +31.20.6654181
e-mail LHV@iisg.NL

Work in progress

The present paper reports on work in progress at the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam, both among the research staff of the institute as such and by a special project, the Historical Sample of the Netherlands (HSN, Historische Steekproef Nederland).¹

Traditional labour history, to put on a straw man, focussed on the labour movement and regarded workers who did not belong to it as dupes, who were mistaken about their true class interests. It implicitly also focussed exclusively on wage labour as the main source of income for workers. The past two decades have changed this. The labour movement has lost much of the credibility it once had as the core liberation movement. The attention of historians has been drawn to other groups than the working classes, and within the working classes to other groups than male wage earners and breadwinners. Over the past few years, the IISH has decided to turn the old question why some workers did not join the labour movement on its head. By focussing on all possible living strategies, a large number of activities are brought into picture. Prostitution, stealing, poor relief, petty - or not so petty - entrepreneurship, production for home consumption, producer or consumer cooperatives, letting out rooms, mutual insurance, saving are all strategies to get by. Households can engage in a number of these activities, but some of them are mutually exclusive. To get a job, or charity, may require one or even one's family, to live a respectable life, and this may foreclose prostitution, or membership of a trade union, as living strategies.² This defines sets or mixes of strategies an individual or family can adopt. If these mixes are identified, they may offer new explanations as to why some groups of workers were more likely to belong to the labour movement than others. The aim of the present paper is to do precisely that, to see whether we can distinguish between the strategies employed by a group of trade union activists, and other workers.

The location for our enquiry is Twente. Twente is the Lancashire of the Netherlands: its prime cotton industry region and for long one of the most thoroughly proletarianised regions of the Netherlands. Within this area we focus on the textile town of Enschede, including nearby Lonneker where many of the workers employed in the Twente textile mills lived.

The data on trade union activists derive from a survey held among Twente textile workers in the fall of 1920. This was a project devised by a promising law student, Ph.J. Idenburg, the later director of the Dutch Central Bureau for Statistics (CBS). He was worried about the mentality of proletarianised workers and with the assistance of an agency specialised in social work (CBSA, *Centraal Bureau voor Sociale Adviezen*) and the major

¹. The data on the survey group and additional data on the control group were collected and an initial analysis on them was executed by Vermeulen as a trainee with the HSN/IISG in September-December 1996. The subsample of HSN from which the control group was selected was originally created by HSN for Maarten Panhuijsen for research into regional demography (RDN) at the Department of History of Nijmegen University. Panhuijsen also collected the core data for this group. The statistical data were analysed by Kees Mandemakers (HSN/IISG). The text is by Heerma van Voss. The usual disclaimer applies.

². M. van der Linden, 'Households and labour movements', *Economic and social history in the Netherlands* 6(1994), 129-144. In principle, this approach focusses on all family members and does not suppose that family strategies are decided upon without intra-family tensions and conflicts. As the Idenburg survey only covers male workers, the present paper focusses on male textile workers and their strategies.

Dutch trade union federations, he proceeded to organise a survey of workers' opinions.³ The original questions lists of 330 Twente textile workers have been preserved. Some of these are anonymous, but many contain the names and addresses of the workers that filled in the questionnaire. This allowed us to identify 58 male textile workers from Enschede and Lonneker. From the answers to the questions it transpires that these lists, which were distributed through the trade unions, have been filled in by active trade union members. It is also clear that, although in a few instances questionnaires were filled in by women workers, the questionnaire was addressed to and in fact answered mostly by male workers.

As a control group we used a group of textile workers from the data collected by the Historical Sample of the Netherlands (HSN).⁴ This project aims at constructing a database containing the data on a random sample of 0.5 percent of the Dutch population born between 1812 and 1923. For this sample the data available from large scale sources will be collected. Among these sources are birth, marriage and death certificates and the Dutch population register, which enables one to follow every individual and household dynamically and thus to reconstruct very rich life event histories. One of the aims of the research underlying this paper was to see whether the data which will be collected in this database allow us to say something about the living strategies of the individuals concerned and their families.

Data

The data used in this analysis thus consist of a group of 58 participants in the Idenburg survey, namely all identifiable male workers living in Enschede and Lonneker. From one of the subsets of the HSN a random sample of 58 textile workers living in Enschede and Lonneker around the year 1920 was drawn.

Due to the nature of this subset, the survey group and the control group are not completely comparable. The control group consists of workers born in Enschede and Lonneker, whereas the survey group shows the results of the fact that the Enschede cotton industry drew a great number of immigrants to the town, especially in the 1890s.⁵ Of this group only 43 % was born in Enschede and Lonneker, 14 % was born elsewhere in Twente and 43 % was born outside the region. The control group was drawn from those born in the years 1881-1885. The spread in the years of birth of the survey group was much larger and with an

³. The results of the survey are to be found in IISG, Archive CBSA, inv.nr. 184-192. On the survey see Lex Heerma van Voss, 'Van CAO's tot zonden; 330 Twentse textielarbeiders in 1920 over hun drijfveren ondervraagd', *Textielhistorische Bijdragen* 27 (1987) 31-52 and 'Twente 1920: gelijktijdige generaties?', *Tijdschrift voor Sociale Geschiedenis* 15(1989)1, 1-23.

⁴. For the HSN see O. Hoogerhuis, A. de Klerk and K. Mandemakers, (eds.) *Over Zeeuwse mensen. Demografische en sociale ontwikkelingen in Zeeland in de negentiende en twintigste eeuw* (Special issue *Zeeland* 7(1998)3), O. Boonstra and K. Mandemakers (eds.) *De levensloop van de Utrechtse bevolking in de 19e eeuw* (Assen 1995).

⁵. A. Blonk, *Fabrieken en mensen* (Dissertation Universiteit van Amsterdam, 1929), 118. In 1920 59 % of the population of Enschede and Lonneker was born outside these municipalities (B. Hesselink, *Gerhard Jannink & Zonen te Enschede. 1853-1938. Jaren van rationalisatie en verzet* (Hengelo 1983), 37).

average birth year of 1879 it was some four years older than the control group⁶.

These differences follow directly from the control group selected, and their direction, if not their exact size, could have been predicted at the outset. Only from an analysis of the data, it became clear that these differences had further consequences for the comparability of the two groups.

The social background of the two samples was tested by comparing the occupations of the fathers, as found in the last entry in the population register for the fathers and in the marriage acts of the members of our samples. These were classified according to the standard Dutch social classification list, the so-called Van Tulder classification. Of the 6 social groups distinguished by this classification, group 5, that of the trained workers, was dominant in both our samples. This group was taken together with the group below it, that of the unskilled workers, to which only few of the fathers belonged. No fathers belonged to the highest social group. Groups 2, 3 and 4 were taken together, and are designated 'middle' in the table. In the survey group about half of the fathers for whom an occupation could be found belonged to the middle group, in the control group only one third belonged to this category. This difference between the groups almost disappears when we take the occupations as recorded in the marriage acts of the sons. However, the number of available marriage acts was smaller, and we therefore attach more value to the data derived from the population register. If we look at the sectors of industry, in both groups about 60% of the fathers worked in industry. In the control group the remaining fathers were evenly divided over agriculture and services. Among the fathers of the members of the survey group the service sector was more important.⁷

Further analysis made clear that the difference in social status of the fathers was age specific. The higher proportions of fathers with a middle social status was found exclusively in the cohort born after 1885 of our survey group. It also proved to be related to place of birth. The fathers with the middle status in our survey group had been living significantly more often in Enschede and Lonneker. Their sons were thus no immigrants.

⁶. Two thirds of the survey group was born between 1869 and 1890, with a standard deviation of 10,5.

⁷. In cases of doubt, fathers' occupations were classified as industrial. The overall picture based on the occupations recorded in the marriage acts is the same, with the strong position of the agricultural sector among the data for the control group being somewhat more prominent.

Table 1. Differences between both samples

	Survey group		Control group	
	%	N	%	N
Social classification fathers (last entry in population register)				
Low (=Van Tulder 5, 6)	52.9	18	70.2	40
Middle (=Van Tulder 2, 3, 4)	47.1	16	29.8	17
Not available		24		1
Social classification fathers (marriage acts sons)				
Low (=Van Tulder 5, 6)	71.4	15	66.7	14
Middle (=Van Tulder 2, 3, 4)	28.6	6	33.3	7
Not available		37		37
sectoral division of occupations fathers (last entry in population register)				
Industry	58.8	20	64.9	37
Agriculture	11.8	4	17.5	10
Services	29.4	10	17.5	10
Not available		24		1

These differences between the two samples limit the conclusions we can draw from the data, but there are still some conclusion we can draw.

Living strategies

Work in the Twente cotton factories allowed only for a small measure of social climbing. Most workers remained within the lower social group as defined before. In this respect there were no differences between the two groups. The net result of the slow progression through the ranks of only a minority of the textile workers is visible from table 2.

Table 2. Occupational status through work career Twente textile workers (percentage and n)

	Father	age ± 20	age ± 40	age ± 50
Survey group				
Low	61.9 (13)	96.1 (49)	84.3 (43)	78.9 (30)
Middle	38.1 (8)	3.9 (2)	15.7 (8)	21.1 (8)
Control group				
Low	76.7 (33)	98.2 (56)	89.5 (51)	78.2 (43)
Middle	23.3 (10)	1.8 (1)	10.5 (6)	21.8 (12)

Work in the textile factory in the 1920s started usually at age 14. At age 20, only a small percentage of the workers had acquired an intermediate position as *getouwbaas* (weaving foreman) or *drosselbaas* (spinning foreman). At age 50, the textile workers in our control group had acquired roughly the same social status as their fathers, but the survey group, who had more to lose because of their fathers' higher social status, indeed lost more. All in all, it transpires that seeking a factory job was not a way to climb socially. This was also clear from the answers to the survey. Three fourths of the textile workers would prefer to have another job. "If I could find another job", the 38 year old Enschede weaver L. Capelle declared, "I would leave tomorrow".⁸ When other jobs became available from the 1950s, Twente textile workers advised their children to try their luck elsewhere.⁹

The table indicates that the social status acquired by the two groups was very comparable. However, the figures hide an important difference. The middle status won by the more successful workers in our survey group, the trade union activists, was won mostly in the factory. In two cases they became shopkeepers. But in the control group the better social position was acquired not in the factory, but mainly in agriculture. Of the 10 textile workers in this group whose fathers had been farmers, 6 ended their career as farmer too, most of them presumably having taken over the small family farm.

Income data were derived from the income tax levied in Enschede and Lonneker. in 1910 and 1920. Predictably, most textile workers paid no tax, or only a small amount. From yearly family income a certain amount (450 or 600 guilders, or more if the family counted dependant children) was deducted for indispensable expenses. Tax was levied over the remaining income. The average remaining income of the two groups was comparable in 1910 (at 96 guilders for the survey group and 83 guilders for the control group), but a relatively wide gap existed in 1920, when the remaining income was 192 guilders for the survey group

⁸. Idenburg survey, no. 277.

⁹. Th. J. IJzerman, *Beroepsaanzien en arbeidsvoldoening met betrekking tot de arbeidsvoorziening in de Twents-Achterhoekse Textielindustrie* (Leiden 1959).

and 103 guilders for the control group. This could reflect the fact that the control group was closer together in age and therefore closer together in family life cycle. In 1920 this group was 35-40 years. We can compare this with a normal age at marriage for male textile workers of about 25 years.¹⁰ As children started earning an income at age 14, many households in the control group will have been in the situation where the wives were no longer earning a wage and the children not yet. The larger age spread of the households in the survey group will have meant that these households will have included more wage earning wives and children.¹¹ In fact, the survey inquired into this. This question was not answered by a number of respondents and we cannot be sure whether this meant that in those cases there were no family members who contributed to household income or the respondent simply did not want to answer the question. However that may be, for the survey as a whole the average weekly wage was 25.82 guilders. 89 Respondents declared that their wives (27 cases) or children (67 cases) contributed to family income. This added the substantial average sum of 9.45 guilders to a weekly income of 24.99 guilders of the males in this group.

Another income related figure may offer us a better comparison. For both groups the *kadaster* records offer the taxable value of the houses they owned or rented and the size of the plots these houses were built on. These were collected for the 1910-1930 period. They show an interesting difference between the survey group and the control group. The survey group did better with an average plot size of 359 square metres (control group 194 sq. m.) and an average value of 90,16 guilders (control group 71,16 g.). It owned its own house far more often than the control group did. This suggested that the survey group did better, perhaps investing more energy in its job career at the factory. However, if the important way up for the control group was inheriting its father's farm, much depends on the age on which this happened, and we have no data on that yet.

Another way to rise socially is by selecting the right spouse. In both groups the social status of the father of the bride was slightly higher than that of the father of the bridegroom. The mothers of the bridegrooms were also less often able to sign with their names than the mothers of the bride, which may be another indicator that the average social status of the brides was slightly higher than that of their textile working husbands. Both differences are significant (at the 0.05 level). The differences between the two groups are negligible, given the small numbers, except in the case of illiterate mothers.¹² There may be indications of a living

¹⁰. The mean age at marriage of the men in the survey group was 26.0 years, of the control group 24.7. The mean age of their spouses was 25.3 and 24.3 years respectively. The age found for larger groups of textile workers in nearby, but more rural Wierden and Borne by F.M.M. Hendrickx, *'In order not to fall into poverty'. Production and Reproduction in the Transition from Proto-industry to Factory Industry in Borne and Wierden (the Netherlands)* (Amsterdam 1997), 138 is about 27 years.

¹¹. Another reason not to push analysis of the income data too far is the fact that there is only a poor correlation between the income data and occupational status and between the income data of the two tax years. This can be caused partly because there is only a small variation within occupational status in both groups.

¹². A plausible explanation for this phenomenon, and for the fact that the mean number of children was higher in the families in the survey group (4.7) than in the control group (3.7) is that more brides in the control group came from an agricultural background. R. Schüren,

strategy here, even if it probably was only of limited importance.

Table 3. Social aspects marriage (percentage and n)

Occupational status fathers of	Survey group		Control group	
	Bridegroom	Bride	Bridegroom	Bride
Low	71.4 (15)	60.7 (17)	66.7 (14)	61.9 (13)
Middle	28.6 (6)	39.3 (11)	33.3 (7)	39.1 (8)
Illiteracy				
Fathers	17.4 (4)	11.1 (3)	19.0 (4)	19.0 (4)
Mothers	43.3 (13)	30.3 (10)	67.7 (21)	57.1 (16)

Conclusion

Our first conclusion relates to the differences between the two samples. We used the available control group precisely for that reason, because it was available. As more data are collected and put in our database for the HSN basic sample, it will become less time consuming to construct a control group which matches the survey group in age, place of birth and social background better than our present control group does. As became clear in the case of income data, the analysis of these data depends on having two groups which are in the same phase of the family cycle.

This of course qualifies somewhat the material conclusions we can draw from the present sample. However, one point clearly emerges. The present literature on the Dutch cotton textile industry describes the move from small farming, through cottage industry, into the factory as a one way street, even if it allows for textile workers working a small plot of land as a side line.¹³ This was also evident in the Idenburg survey. Of the whole group of active

‘Strukturen sozialer Ungleichheit und Fertilität. Eine Rekonstitution van Familien “geborener” und “proletarisierter” ländlicher Textilarbeiter während der Industrialisierung in der zweiten Hälfte des 19. Jahrhunderts’ in W. Conze and W. Engelhardt (eds.), *Arbeiterexistenz im 19. Jahrhunderts. Lebensstandard und Lebensgestaltung deutscher Arbeiter und Handwerker* (Stuttgart 1981), 163-193 has shown that in nearby Borne in the second half of the nineteenth century textile workers’ families with a mother coming from a small farming background limited the number of children more than other textile workers’ wives. This can be checked with the present data, but this has not been done yet.

¹³. The importance of industrial workers who remained farmers by heart was noted for the Limburg mining industry (L. Heerma van Voss, ‘Een plaats onder de zon’, *Brood en Rozen. Tijdschrift voor de Geschiedenis van Sociale Bewegingen* 4 (1999) 3, 71-89). See for

trade union members, none of which in our Enschede and Lonneker subsample became a farmer later on, not less than 87 % declared that they worked a piece of land.¹⁴ When discussing other, more desirable jobs, the alternative mentioned most often was working in agriculture. Many of the respondents felt like 34-year old Hendrikus Brilman, a *sterker* (starch worker) from Almelo who desired other work because of “the free air and to flee the seclusion in the large prisons”¹⁵.

The present research points to the continuing importance of a return to the land later in life as a living strategy for a sizeable minority of textile workers. It is understandable that we do not find this group among the survey group, which after all consisted of active trade union members. Those who defined themselves socially as farmers’ sons, temporarily working in a factory until they would succeed to the farm, were unlikely to become very active trade union members. They were more likely to spend scarce free time on their fathers’ land, than in a trade union meeting.

All in all we can conclude that questions regarding living strategies can be answered with the data collected by the HSN. Using a control group led us to the conclusion that we should use a control group which resembles our sample more closely. More interestingly, however, it did exactly what our the living strategies project is for. It pointed us to a group of workers and to a strategy mix which had escaped the scrutiny of historians so far. This group had living strategies which were focussed on the family form, even if they were registered as cotton workers. We can understand readily that the labour movement was not very successful among this group which probably defined itself as entrepreneurs to be, temporarily confined in a cotton factory. Their fellow workers hated their confinement “in the large prisons” no less than these farmers sons, but only the latter group had a viable strategy of fleeing it in time.

the Noord-Brabant wool industry F.W. Simon, *Boeren en wevers: een sociaal-geographische monographie van de ontwikkelingen en organisatie van het productieproces in het gebied van Helmond* (Utrecht [1947]). For Nuenen, a village in this woolen industry area, C.G.W.P. van der Heijden, ‘Wevende landbouwers of landbouwende wevers? Een onderzoek in het Oostbrabantse textielgebied aan het einde van de negentiende eeuw’, *Textielhistorische Bijdragen* 28(1988)53-80 has demonstrated that by 1880 heads of households were mostly either weaver or farmer. Only 8 % of those listed as weavers could have the means to gain a substantial income from agriculture. However, van der Heijden focusses on heads of households and does not discuss the possibility that other family members might work temporarily in the textile industry to return to the farm later on.

¹⁴. The relevant question was answered positively by 243 respondents, negatively by 38 respondents and not by 49 respondents. Many respondents did not answer all questions. If we treat the non-respondents as negative answers, the figure for textile workers working a piece of land would drop to 74 %.

¹⁵. Idenburg survey, no. 176. Of the 201 respondents who declared that they would prefer working outside the cotton industry, 47 mentioned the lack of free air as a reason. 84 Respondents mentioned other kinds of work as more desirable. Of these 40 (48 %) mentioned agriculture, 15 (18 %) government jobs and 29 (34 %) other alternatives.