

CLASS STRUCTURE IN THE NETHERLANDS by Dr. E.W. Hofstee and G.A. Kooy
(department of rural sociology, Agricultural University, Wageningen,
The Netherlands.)

The kingdom of the Netherlands belongs to the small nations. The total area is only 33.000 km² and it has less than 11.000.000 inhabitants. But this means that the density of the population as compared with most of the other Western countries is very high. It is clear that such a dense population cannot reach a reasonable level of prosperity in a predominantly agrarian country. As is well-known Holland is prosperous. The picture of the well-fed Dutchman, who stands in a grassy meadow among his cows, dressed out with improbable wide trousers, a checked blouse and an odd covering of the head, is therefore a stereotype, which misses nearly every quality of reality. Only ± 17% of the total male laborforce works in agriculture.

However, a town with more than a million of inhabitants is lacking in this country -the capital Amsterdam has less than 900.000 people- there are 11 towns with more than 100.000 residents or together 30% of the total Dutch population. Furthermore there is a large number of smaller towns, so that only 15% of Holland's population lives in municipalities, which count no more than 5000 residents. Since the last half century a notable concentration of population took place, for in 1899 35% of all Dutchmen still lived in municipalities, which had less than 5000 inhabitants. It is plausible that among every 10 present-day Dutchmen are 2 to 3 "countrymen" and that the other seven or eight are "townsmen" by profession and style of living.

During the last 50 years the regional differences in prosperity and culture lessened importantly. In spite of this phenomenon the social hierarchy shows a number of important regional and even local deviations from the "average" pattern. The history of far-off days is outlined in specific-regional and specific-local traits. This as such seems of importance in our paper. But we find a second important fact. Holland as a whole has known a past, which differed in certain respects from that of its surroundings and this also finds its expression in the pattern of the social hierarchy.

The influence of the modern general-Western culture- ideals destroyed neither the typical Dutch characteristics nor those of the different regions and communities. Because of the confined length of this dissertation we can only say, however, some words about the peculiar historical factors, which influenced the social hierarchy in The Netherlands.

Regarding the Netherlands in general, must be noticed that slavery and half-slavery were things of the past at an early stage in history, at least in the Western and Northern parts. The Frisians e.g. hardly knew slavery since the beginning of the Christian era; half-slavery had disappeared in the earldom of Holland in the 15th century. Moreover there was an important urban development and through that a loss of power of the nobility in the Western and Northern parts. Already during the 16th century the urban commoners in the sea-provinces played an economical and political role, which outrivalled that of the nobility. Since the end of the middle ages this country has always borne the stamp of "commonalty", however, it must be admitted that the ruling upper class liked to compete for patents of nobility, which sometimes were obtainable in the years before the French revolution

for those who were able to pay. Another characteristic of the Dutch development is the rather late rise of big industry. In contrast with England, France and other Western countries the big industrial concerns were founded in a time, in which the idea of a governmental responsibility for the material well-being of the working class was already realized. The Dutch proletariat of the last century therefore often was an agricultural laborer. The patriarchal atmosphere in the agricultural labor relations, which had existed until then, disappeared rather abruptly, certainly in the regions with arable farming only. Thousands of workers in agriculture became the victims of regular unemployment during winter-time.

In connection with the hierarchial differences, noticeable within the boundary-line of contemporary Holland, it is of main importance that the sandy, less fertile regions in the Southern and Eastern parts of the country as compared with the non-sandy and fertile parts along the coast were and stayed poor and underdeveloped. It is hardly 100 years ago that economical and social organization in these sandy regions were still mediaeval in many respects. Commercial and thereafter industrial capitalism had hardly touched the poor sandy regions before 1850. But since then much has been changed there. Industrial centers as Eindhoven and Enschede -a century ago still insignificant rural places- grew very rapidly; now they have each more than 100.000 inhabitants. The contemporary peasantry is able to compete in knowledge with that in the coastal provinces. Nevertheless we still find different relations, also in hierarchial respect, in these sandy regions than elsewhere.

However, since 1813 all citizens have the same legal rights and democratic consciousness is deeply rooted in all minds, the daily interhuman relations in the Netherlands are still ever expressing the principle of human inequality. Different persons enjoy a different measure of social prestige, with which particular rights and duties in social intercourse are connected. This means that society is composed of strata -unities with a slumbering group character-, which possess a higher or a lower status and of which the members play roles, given with and by the status of the stratum. This order, of which we will consider the dynamical nature presently, is nearly generally accepted. Many people try to conquer a higher status for themselves and their children, so unconsciously recognizing that they agree with the hierarchial principle, on which society has been built up. Certain groups dispute each other's prestige, but this as such is no indication of a rejection of the hierarchial principle. It rather indicates the opposite. It is plausible to state that Dutch society is characterized by an "estate" structure. An overt or covert antithesis between economical interest groups is not the main line of action in this country. It must be admitted that about half a century ago there existed a hostile class feeling among many laborers, for labor conditions were still often very bad and socialistic propaganda preached Marxian ideas. But by a very good legislation and increasing common wealth the socialistic movement changed its aims and the socialistic laborers became more or less bourgeois in their attitudes and desires. Only the communistic laborers (6% of all Dutch voters) maintained their attitude of hostility against a society in which free enterprise is an important element. If one follows the political happenings in the Netherlands, one knows that the socialistic and confessional workers

(the vast majority of all workers) strive for the betterment of their material position indeed, but that they in essence reconcile to an economical order in which private property of the means of production has a fundamental place. The majority of the Dutch laborers desires a welfare state similar to the Labor Party in England and this majority acknowledges silently or expressly that hierarchical relations in society are a necessary result of the difference in individual abilities and responsibilities.

The "average" hierarchical pattern in the Netherlands is predominantly based upon the interaction of the following four principles: profession, cultural level, birth and material property. The principle "material property" decreased in significance, however, it is still a very important measuring-staff of prestige in the eyes of certain groups. Naturally it is impossible to determine mathematically, which relative significance each of the four principles has. But it is definite that the expectations concerning the conduct -and so concerning the status- of an individual are primarily built up on the individual's profession.

During the 19th century the "estates" had a pronounced uncommunicative character, however, there was a certain condescension and ascent of individuals on the social ladder. The increasing economical differentiation, the introduction of universal compulsory education, the universal suffrage and a number of other factors caused that in the course of time the higher estates opened more and more for persons born in lower estates but showing to possess particular qualities. Nevertheless it is still so that those born in the so-called better circles on an average get a much better chance to follow a profession which gives a high prestige, than those, born in lower circles. By the attitudes and the more comfortable financial means in the surroundings in which they grew up, the first have undeniable advantages, to the latter. But as matters now stand -especially by the increasing cultural and financial levelling- the arrearage of people from out the simpler circles in the process of social ascent lessens importantly. After all one could conclude that this double levelling must wipe out social inequality successively. But that is only half the truth. Whereas the social distance between top and base of the hierarchy lessens indeed, the number of strata-that is at least the impression we get- increases. With some exaggeration we can say that the 19th century laborers formed a grey undifferentiated mass, while they are separated today into at least two groups which differ considerably as regards view of life -that of the unskilled and that of the skilled laborers.

An important difference with the United States lies in the fact that individuals who do strict manual work, enjoy relatively very little prestige in the Netherlands, while persons who do pure intellectual work enjoy relatively very high prestige. Every laborer who wants to bring his children forward in this world experiences the least administrative position which his son gains as a social ascent. In this connection it is worth noting that even the better-paid lower administrative workers have quite often a smaller income than skilled laborers. But they earn a "monthly salary", while the best laborer receives his "weekly wages", and this also being a characteristic of prestige. The respect for a profession which bears an intellectual stamp appears too from the

position on the social ladder, occupied by the intellectual. It is communis opinio that a professor belongs to those who form the top of the social hierarchy.

Another important difference with the United States lies in the valuation of those who render personal services. A hairdresser e.g. -the standing of his trade plays of course a role in this connection- can be respected man and at least he enjoys more prestige than the skilled laborer.

Because of the impossibility of a detailed discussion, we can only sum up and consider superficially the main groups from which the social hierarchy in the Netherlands has been built up.

As will be clear there is a large difference between urban and rural hierarchical structure. One gets in some degree an idea of this difference by the image of two ladders, one long and the other short, placed beside each other. Yet this image is somewhat too simple. For as the urban hierarchy, irrespective of town, is rather uniform, in the country there are considerable differences. In some regions farmers with 15 hectares are respected men, but in other parts of the country such farmers belong to the lower groups. The distribution of landed property or soil use -so diverging according to region- appears (still) to be a weighty factor in connection with the distribution of prestige. Some rural areas therefore hardly know a local hierarchy, if one only considers the native people. Other agrarian regions on the contrary know sharp frontiers between the estates. The "big" farmers of Northeast Groningen e.g. form a very exclusive circle from out which hardly any real personal contact exists with what they call "small" farmers. These "small" farmers would be considered as rather big farmers in many other parts of the Netherlands.

As far as we can see, there are the following main groups in the hierarchy; nobility and haute bourgeoisie, the upper old middle class, the upper new middle class, the lower old middle class, the lower new middle class, the group of the skilled laborers and that of the unskilled laborers. This sequence does not express fully the measure of prestige, enjoyed by the members of these estates. Dutch sociologists have succeeded in determining the professional hierarchy in their country, but, as we said, this hierarchy is based on more principles than profession. It is possible that anyone belongs to the upper old middle class by profession, but that he is a nobleman by birth and a member of the upper new middle class by education. This example is no exception. The status of this fictative man will depend foremost on what he is feeling himself and on his behavior in social intercourse.

Dutch nobility has about 7500 members whose position differs considerably from that of the British nobility. This is exclusively nobility by birth, for, although, the queen is entitled to ennoble meritorious citizens, this hardly happened during the last hundred years. Dutch nobility does not possess any particular constitutional position. The average Dutchman is not much impressed by noble names in spite of the role played by the nobility, especially in representative government functions (royal court, exterior service, etc.) and in the forces. But we must mention that in 1920 still 30% of the Dutch representatives abroad belonged to the nobility whereas this percentage was halved in 1950. The haute bourgeoisie is an exclusive group of old distinguished families which often have double patronymics and which have kept their

traditional character by wealth and/or representative functions and posts of honour. Marriages between haute bourgeoisie and noble circles are rather frequent. Because the position of both groups is based for a larger part upon principles of a nearly past period, it is comprehensible that the circumstances of noble and haute bourgeoisie families sometimes depreciated considerably. Moreover there were members, who disappeared into other strata of society by impoverishment or degeneration.

The terms old and new middle class are wellknown in European sociology. It may be, however, that they need some explanation in America. By old middle class we understand the group of employers in agriculture, craft, commerce, traffic and industry. Among them one comprehensibly finds people with a diverging wealth and lever of education. Yet they have one thing in common; they all think in terms of "property" as opposed to the diverging members of the new middle class who think in terms of "labor-income". They bear the particular risk of the employer which the salaried or the fee receiving member of the new middle class does not know. This is already an important reason why they vary from the latter. Usually the member of the old middle class is a supporter of a political party which does not sympathize with a very progressive social policy. The least prosperous members of the old middle class feel threatened and even declassé nowadays by the bettered financial position of the laborers. It is impossible to draw a clear line between the higher and the lower old middle class. Both groups pass gradually into each other, but the small farmer and the greengrocer only have objective contacts with an industrialist who has a concern of considerable size. It is practically unthinkable that one of the two would marry the daughter of this industrialist. The idea of "birds of a feather are obliged to flock together" is deeply rooted in the old middle class. It is indeed, understandable that the inclination to marry inside the "ingroup" is very strong here, for marriage often is a matter of business combination too.

The new middle class is for a larger part a product of Western technological development. Generally estate consciousness in new middle class circles is less pronounced than in the former group. Those who belong to the new middle class hardly have a past as such, and compared with old middle class people they have the lack of a clear perspective for their children (relatively little professional heredity). The line between high and low in this group can be drawn much easier than in the old middle class. This is the result of the fact that nearly every member of this young class owes his position to a general education of a higher or a lower level. Those who at least have a leaving certificate of the "Hogere Burger School" or the grammar school* are usually considered to be members of the higher new middle class. In this group we find the higher administrative functionaries of the large concerns, higher civil servants, scientists, politicians and persons with a profession, based on an academic education (surgeons, clergymen, barristers etc.) .If we are right, estate consciousness among the lower new middle class is stronger than among the higher one. Notwithstanding all that, there will not be many solicitors, sociologists or higher civil servants who directly approve of a marriage of their daughter with an office-clerk, a postman or even a primary schoolteacher.

The division of the laborers into two groups -that of the skilled and that of the unskilled manual workers- is a division according to the yardstick of style of life. The skilled worker lives and thinks

differently from his unskilled colleague. Is this true in general, a further distinction is necessary. We mean that between the agricultural and the industrial laborers. The status of the agricultural worker, also of the skilled one, is low. Industrial laborers often look down upon the agricultural workers and therefore many of the latter change the farm for the factory. It is true that the average labor conditions in industry are better than in agriculture, but the role, played by prestige in this connection, is considerable. A clear indication of the difference in style of life between skilled and unskilled laborers and between industrial and agricultural workers is the birthrate. Skilled laborers usually have fewer children than the unskilled ones, industrial laborers often have smaller families than their colleagues in agriculture. The skilled workers in both groups mostly have the strongest inclination to provide their children with a future, which helps them to rise above the surroundings in which they grew up.

Accordingly as economic life is based more and more upon big industry and higher demands are made upon popular education, the process of social ascent will mean in increasing measure an ascent from out the labor class to the lower new middle class and from out the lower new middle class to the higher new middle class. Already this advance is quite frequent, but in general the distance, across which it takes place, is not great. The laborer whose son becomes an office-clerk is no exception, the worker whose son becomes a professor is. It is probable that the distance of social uplift will be increased in course of time by a more liberal granting of scholarships and other facilities, the increasing age of compulsory attendance at school, and a wage-level which does not force the least wealthy parents to continue to send their children into the labor-process at an early age.

* Normally the child is 12 years old when it begins at a Hogere Burger School (civic school) or a grammar school. These schools have resp. 5 and 6 forms. At the HBS the accent lies upon mathematics and the modern languages (French, English and German are compulsory subjects). Although the pupil of the grammar school is obliged to study the three modern languages, Latin and Greek are most important here. Everyone wishing entrance to the university needs a certificate of one of these schools.