

A Dutch Sodom and Gomorrah: degenerates, moralists and authority in Yerseke, 1870–1914

ROB VAN GINKEL

Amsterdam School for Social Science Research, University of Amsterdam, Oude Hoogstraat 24, 1012 CE Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Abstract. In 1870, the Dutch state privatized several oyster banks in Zeeland waters. This measure brought about a rapid capitalization of the oyster industry. The Zeeland town of Yerseke soon became the national centre of oyster farming and trade. Initially, oyster farming was quite successful. Yerseke turned into an affluent country town which attracted hundreds of migrants. When by the mid-1880s serious problems assailed the oyster industry, a large number of people left the town, although newcomers were continually arriving. In the wake of these developments the community's social organization changed drastically and social control withered. Fights, drunkenness and theft were part and parcel of everyday life. In the course of the 1890s, this social disorganization was checked by the civilizing missions of churches and the disciplining offensives of the local authorities and police. Perhaps even more important was the increasing social integration of the village community. The present article aims to uncover the dynamics and interrelations of these processes.

Introduction

The rural town of Yerseke lies hidden in the periphery of the Netherlands. It is situated at 51° 29' N and 4° 02' E on the southern bank of the Eastern Scheldt estuary in the province of Zeeland and has a population of approximately 6,000. The local scene is dominated by no less than six churches. Among the Dutch, Yerseke has gained a reputation of being a rigid orthodox Calvinist community, which is a part of the Dutch Bible Belt. It is also famous for its oysters and mussels. Yerseke is the country's foremost shellfish centre, home-port to more than a hundred fishing vessels.

Although Yerseke's image as an industrious but quiet community of pious Protestant fisher folk may still hold true to a large extent today, this was certainly not the case during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. At that time, the village was the scene of much turmoil and social unrest. These mounting tensions were triggered by rapid transformations of the local economy.

In 1870, the Dutch government divided large areas of the Eastern Scheldt into parcels which could be leased at public auctions and this enclosure of the marine commons was meant to stimulate oyster farming. In the wake

of the transition from capture to culture fisheries, many newcomers settled in Yerseke. The town was conveniently located near a vast oyster bank and connected to an international railway network. For these reasons, most oyster farmers and dealers set up their firms there. Many workers were required, since the procedure of oyster farming was quite labor intensive and hundreds of men, women, and children, mostly from the surrounding countryside, migrated to the village.

The arrival of so many newcomers brought about drastic changes in the community's social structure. Social cohesion and social control withered in a substantial part of the local society. Brawls, drunkenness and theft became part and parcel of everyday life. Yerseke not only gained an image of Cockaigne, where "the gold of the water" was plentiful, but in the eyes of the orthodox Calvinists it had also turned into a morally corrupt Sodom and Gomorrah. It was only around the turn of the century that the community began to steer towards calmer waters. Church councils attempted to counter the excesses of social unrest and the local government tried to restore law and order. Both institutions played an important role in the stabilizing process. Through their civilizing and disciplining campaigns they restrained what they perceived as the "degenerates" among the villagers.

The concept of a "civilizing offensive" was coined by the Dutch historian Piet de Rooy (1979) as an adaptation of Christopher Lasch's notion of "the forces of organized virtue" (1977: 169). A number of Dutch historians and social scientists, especially those who are influenced by the theoretical perspective of the German-born sociologist Norbert Elias (see especially 1978/82), present examples of civilizing missions in the Netherlands.¹ However, their work gives little exposure to the effects of disciplining, a notion more akin to Michel Foucault's sociology (see, for example, Foucault, 1977). By "civilizing offensive" I mean the attempts of certain people to influence and change the behavior and attitudes of others through ideological means. A "disciplining offensive" aims to achieve the same end, although with different means – to wit, the threat of punishment. In the present article I aim to show how, in the case of Yerseke, civilizing and disciplining efforts coalesced into a powerful force in the moulding of morality.

However, the transformation from a turbulent to a more tranquil village life cannot be adequately comprehended by merely taking into account the civilizing and disciplining offensives initiated consciously "from above". This work is not only performed "from without", but also "from within" (de Regt 1984). That is, people sometimes try to conform to the cultural norms and behavioral standards of the members of higher classes. In doing so, they not only try to achieve greater esteem in the eyes of the latter but also more self-esteem. In this respect, it is also important to consider developments in the

relationships among the villagers. A denser social network usually increases social cohesion and social control. This article describes and analyses these processes and their interplay in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Yerseke.

Demographic and economic developments

Mid-nineteenth century Yerseke was a small and remote peasant community in which the inhabitants eked out a meagre livelihood through arduous labor. On Sundays they attended the Reformed church, read the bible, prayed, and if time permitted, visited relatives. This state of affairs changed drastically following the enclosure of the marine commons. The government divided the oyster grounds in the vicinity of Yerseke into small plots which were leased at public auctions.²

Within a short span of time the peasant community was transformed into a maritime community. Hundreds of people, mostly from the surrounding area, migrated to the village, attracted by the employment opportunities in the newly established oyster industry. In 1885, 716 newcomers arrived, bringing the village population up to 2,752, whereas only fifteen years earlier its populace numbered hardly one thousand. On the one hand, this growth rate can be attributed to the rise of the oyster culture, which was initially quite successful, while on the other hand agriculture suffered serious setbacks in the 1870s and 1880s. As a consequence of the Agricultural Crisis in the Netherlands, many peasants and farm-hands were fired and had to find other work. The booming oyster industry offered such new job opportunities. Thus, both push- and pull-factors were decisive in Yerseke's demographic growth.

With the arrival of so many outsiders, the village community underwent far-reaching transformations. Prior to 1870, the villagers maintained multi-stranded relationships with each other and were oriented first and foremost towards their own community. But the migrants did not integrate easily. They had closer ties with outsiders and began to outnumber the autochthons, which brought about a change in Yerseke's socio-cultural composition. A relatively homogeneous community turned into a migrant village. The newcomers had broken away from their old community, kinship ties and institutions, but they had not become integrated into their new community as yet.

One of the poorest and most densely populated parts of the village was nicknamed "the rich neighborhood" or "Poland". Large families occupied cramped houses surrounded by ditches which also served as gutters. Its male inhabitants were said to be "of massive stature, usually unkempt, with shaggy beards and moustaches, lending them a wild appearance".³ Together with

their wives and children they constituted the main source of casual labor for the local oyster companies.

From the mid-1880s until the late 1890s, the oyster industry suffered a serious crisis, caused by speculation, unbridled competition (with an accompanying rise of the lease fees), ecological deterioration, and a fall in prices as a result of over-production. Many entrepreneurs went bankrupt or had to lay off employees, both male and female. They left the village *en masse* because they failed to find other means of making a living locally. Yet newcomers continued to arrive because they had heard of the success-story and employment opportunities of Yerseke's oyster industry. They were ignorant of the turning of the economic tide. It was the casual laborers in particular who experienced hard times, and many had to appeal for help from public or church assistance committees. The number of inhabitants who were temporarily or permanently dependent on poor relief increased sharply. The municipal annual report of 1888 stated:

Compared with earlier years, the condition of the destitute class has deteriorated markedly. Four or more years ago, the number of people dependent upon the support of poor-relief boards was very small, but today this number is large. During the last three or four years, the oyster industry – the inhabitants' major means of existence – flourishes no longer, but on the contrary, it languishes. Formerly, it employed a mass of people, but today there is as much contraction of work as possible. During the good and progressive state, the municipality grew considerably. The settlement of laborers caused a prolific population expansion and now they cannot find work during a substantial part of the year. That is the reason why by the end of the year several families left for South America (Buenos-Ayres) with the steamers which transported them free of charge.⁴

Hundreds of other villagers emigrated to the United States of America. Pamphlets, the village crier and local newspapers depicted a glorious image of the opportunities in the New World, the proverbial land of milk and honey. With unemployment and underemployment on the rise, many purchased a cheap ticket and crossed the Atlantic. No less than 484 Yersekers did so between 1885 and 1900. At least fifty-one ended up in the village of West Sayville (New York).⁵

Nonetheless, the number of inhabitants continued to increase. Between 1885 and 1896, the number of villagers rose from 2,752 to 4,469, only to decrease slightly in 1900 to 4,333. Taking the entire period into account, there was an excess of inward migration, but for the first time since oyster farming began there were some years with a positive balance of outward migration. In 1888 and 1889, for example, a total of 858 people left the

village, while 407 settled there. Yerseke acquired the character of a village whose inhabitants were just passing through; many newcomers arrived, could not establish roots, and left after a shorter or longer period of time.

From the turn of the century until the Great War, out-migration surpassed in-migration. In 1900, there were still 4,333 inhabitants, but by the end of 1913 their number had decreased to 4,087. For every newcomer, two people left Yerseke. During this period, over 3,000 migrated out of the village. Among them were 692 emigrants, most of whom went to the United States of America. Again, many were destined for West Sayville, where they could build a new life with the help of relatives and friends. The departure of so many people mirrored the changes in the oyster industry. In the first fourteen years of the twentieth century, it had become abundantly clear to most entrepreneurs that oyster farming and trade could lead to great profits, but also to huge losses.

Degeneration and profligacy

The oyster industry's precarious economic situation, together with this pattern of migration, had certain consequences for peace and order within the village. Orthodox Calvinists in particular worried about "moral decay" in this "Sodom and Gomorrah". For instance, the oyster and mussel trader Adriaan Lamper contended: "Those who withdraw their heart from religion go to the inn, play billiards and cards, and are guilty of drunkenness, while those who stick to the church stay at home quietly when the work is done."⁶

Dipsomania and drunkenness were rife. Annual feastdays, the fairs, and the weekends often turned into Bacchanalia. Even during the working week heavy drinking-bouts in local pubs were not exceptional and frequently led to fights. One villager wrote: "As with so many in those days, it was also the case with Klaas [an alcoholic]. Although he was fortunate in the oyster business, his legs were too weak to carry the wealth. He continually indulged in debauchery."⁷ Of course, the local inn-keepers and licensed victuallers fared very well.

The municipal authorities attempted to counter this situation. In 1875, they prohibited public drunkenness – to no avail, however. On Christmas Eve of 1876, three fishermen clearly demonstrated how little they respected local rules. After having drunk several glasses of cheap *jenever* [Dutch gin], the three danced on a pub billiard table stark naked. Although the audience found this hilarious, the local policeman did not. The fishermen were arrested and the pub owner imprisoned. The municipal council was outraged and reported the event to the provincial governor. This was not an isolated incident. Alcohol consumption increased structurally, which is evident from the growing number of places where alcoholic beverages were served. In 1876 there were

six licensed pubs and inns; by 1889 this number had grown to fifteen (van Ysseldijk 1973: 486).

In the course of the 1870s, the village witnessed increasing social unrest. Christmas and New Year's Eve were not just occasions for celebration, for many they meant an opportunity for a fist-fight – or worse, for knives were easily drawn and used. Following a number of turbulent Christmas Eves, in 1886 the local newspaper reported that that year's celebration had passed quietly:

While feastdays here are frequently characterized by brawls, arrests and warrants, this year's Christmas passed in good order, without disturbance of the peace, and in harmony. As usual, there was vociferous merriment, but without scandal or annoying agitation. This notwithstanding the fact that musique and dance had been permitted and the pubs were allowed to close later than usual.⁸

The municipal council, having learned its lesson, took the precautionary measure of having the streets patrolled by police reinforcements armed with carabines on such feastdays. The local "force" was not up to this job: until the early 1880s, it consisted of just one policeman, who also happened to be the road-sweeper, messenger of the townhall, bell-ringer, town-crier, and market superintendent, on top of which he also ran a small farm. Although he tried to maintain law and order as far as possible, his subsidiary pursuits meant that these attempts were doomed. Besides, he was regularly seen in the pub, where he – accompanied by the school teacher – quenched his thirst for alcoholic beverages. These two men could hardly be expected to keep the villagers from going astray. In the course of the 1880s, the police force had to be expanded as a result of the growing population and increasing infringements of the law.

These infringements consisted mainly of poaching and theft, especially of oysters. The valuable bivalves were left on underwater plots until they could be marketed. They turned out to be a vulnerable property. During low tide, many villagers trespassed on the leased banks to steal oysters. The lessees and the government considered this a serious crime and contended that the offenders be penalized accordingly. However, it was hard to catch anyone in the act. The fishery police were few in number and had to supervise a vast area. For obvious reasons, the scale of oyster theft is unknown. Police warrants show that it were especially women illegally visiting the plots during low tide who were caught. Apparently, they desperately needed the income earned in this way, for some women – amongst whom Martina ten Have, Cornelia Ockerse and Janna Minnaard – were caught poaching oysters several times. Those who could use boats were much harder to catch in the act, especially when they fished oysters on somebody else's plot under the cover of darkness.

The activities of these pirates of piscary can be regarded as those of aspiring petty capitalists (see also McCay 1984), whose behavior led to the growth of a lively informal economy.

The oyster barons and companies tried to protect the "gold of the water" by having their laborers guard the plots. Yerseke's sole policeman kept a watchful eye from the shore and was assisted by some laborers who had been sworn in as special constables, paid by the large oyster dealers. The government provided a vessel to monitor the oyster banks. However, the entrepreneurs and the guards they hired could not prevent that oyster theft continued. On several occasions, the municipal council requested the Department of Justice to station a larger police force in the village. It was finally successful in 1882, when two constables joined the force.⁹ In spite of their presence and hence the increased chance of getting caught, many could not withstand the challenge of stealing oysters. Apparently, the means of force introduced by the government did not lead to greater self-control on the part of many Yersekers. But in this case, the proverbial open door that may tempt a saint applied.

Thus, several employees of the large planters stole oysters. They sold the bivalves to other oyster farmers or replanted them on a plot which they themselves leased from the state. In doing so, they could sooner realize their aspirations of becoming independent. A retired fisherman said: "Hauling the net over another person's plot is quite easy. Some arrived in Yerseke as poor as church rats and when they died it turned out that they possessed a couple of million guilders. Well, I ask you how that is possible. But you cannot prove anything, because it is all under water." A former oyster farmer recollected the following story:

Two brothers were hired as skippers. One worked for one company and the other for another company. They leased a small, cheap plot in the vicinity of the companies' plots. Every time they had to replant young oysters, they replanted a part of the stock on their own plot. The next year they quit their jobs. They bought their own vessel and started as independent oyster planters. Later on they became the largest planters. By then, all the large companies had disappeared.

Another informant related the following: "There was a lot of theft in those days. Many of those thieves fled to America, because it got too risky to stay here." Although these oral traditions can take on mythical proportions, contemporary official reports and newspapers confirm that poaching, malversations and theft were fairly widespread. Many culprits feared imprisonment and disappeared.

As a consequence of tighter police surveillance, the relations between fishery inspectors and policemen on the one hand and fishermen on the other

deteriorated. The latter sometimes confronted the former with violence and are even said to have used rifles. On their part, the fishery police were nit-picking and summoned the fishermen for even the smallest of offences. The fisher folk and poachers could seldom pay a fine, so that they had to go to prison to serve their sentence.

The municipal council repeated its request for police reinforcements, not only in connection with oyster theft, but also because of frequent disturbances of the peace. These agitations were particularly common during the annual fair in September. Public drunkenness, licentiousness, brawls, knife-fights and riots accompanied the feast. A man found bloodstains on his front door the morning after a fair night (Taylor 1983: 122). Local historian van Ysseldijk even claims that there have been cases of murder and manslaughter (1973: 161). The church councils of the Reformed Church (*Hervormde Kerk*) and the Christian Reformed Community (*Christelijk Gereformeerde Gemeente*) urged the municipal council to prohibit the annual fair. In July 1888, this matter was on the council's agenda. A noisy crowd attended the meeting in the town hall and an even larger and noisier lot awaited the decision outside. The announcement that the fair was to be abolished sparked off riots. Councillors who voted in favor of abolition had to be accompanied home by the police. Less than two months later, on the day the fair used to begin, the village was in turmoil once again. A letter from the municipal council to the King's Commissioner stated that "the population was very excited. On what was formerly the first day of the fair, mobs disturbed the peace, shouting and raging, shattering windows, and committing scandalous actions in the street. The second day might have even been worse had not a strong police force been present."¹⁰ Councillors who voted in favor of abolition met with intimidations, and their houses were pelted with stones, injuring one councillor. Some rioters squeezed the mayor's top hat over his ears before molesting him. A village constable rushed up to the scene and rescued the unfortunate dignitary.¹¹ The municipal council prohibited assembly and successfully requested police reinforcements. Thereupon, feelings calmed down, but the following summer proved to be turbulent once more. At its wit's end, the municipal council decided to allow the fair, not least because of threats expressed against several of its members (van Ysseldijk 1973: 168–72).

Henceforth, the fair was accompanied by fewer excesses, but arson and violence against the Salvation Army – that had only just settled in Yerseke – became a recurring phenomenon to which the local newspaper devoted many a report. In 1890, some Salvation Army soldiers were mis-treated, the windows of their homes smashed, and their official building set alight. Before causing much damage, however, the flames were extinguished. The 1890 municipal report stated: "During the first few months of the year, the police

had a difficult task containing the rebellious movements against the Salvation Army. Therefore, a regulation prohibiting assembly was issued.”¹² Arson was also directed against local entrepreneurs. In the mid-1890s, anonymous incendiaries (soon nicknamed the “black-gang”) set fire to a dozen farm sheds and oyster shacks. One of the culprits was caught and sentenced to five years imprisonment.¹³ The fire-raisers intended to extort money. When their victims failed to pay, some property – usually an edifice – was set ablaze.

Beyond the sphere of infringements of the law, but no less a source of anxiety to the morally upstanding, was the growing “moral corruption” and more specifically the sexual licentiousness of a segment of the village populace. Premarital sexual intercourse was not at all exceptional. Up to the present day, accusing stories are also told about the large oyster farmers and dealers who are said to have sexually abused their female laborers. The vast differences in power between the men and their employees meant that many girls and women had to put up with such behavior, otherwise they would be sacked. According to my informants, the number of undesired pregnancies and illegitimate births increased, and in most cases marriage followed. The consequences of these “forced” weddings can partly be observed in the decline of the average wedding age. In 1871, the mean age of men marrying was 31 years, while women married at the age of 27.8 years. A decade later, the average ages had dropped to 24 and 22.4 years respectively (van Ysseldijk 1973: 409).

These developments were a thorn in the flesh of the local moralists who were concerned about the growing number of victims of venereal diseases. In 1865, the general practitioner established four cases, some three decades later there were no less than 167 in one year. Many mussel skippers sailed to Belgium to sell their bivalves and it was not unusual for them to visit brothels in cities like Antwerp and Brussels. In the village of Yerseke itself, prostitution was not unknown either. A ninety year old retired mussel fishermen recollected:

I sailed with a skipper who went to places where he did not belong. Belgium is rather – eh – tempting. Well, that happened rather frequently. Many died, several mussel skippers among them, because they contracted a venereal disease. I remember that we were in Laken, which is a suburb of Brussels, and my skipper did not return to our boat. He stayed away for two days and nights and then he came back dead drunk on the third night.

Thus, many mussel skippers who were away from home on business went on the spree. Adriaan Lamper, mentioned earlier, said: “when the mussels are delivered in Antwerp, the skippers go drinking and that has brought many to poverty.”¹⁴

Moralists, authority and social control

The licentiousness characterizing Yerseke roughly between 1875 and 1895 was inextricably intertwined with economic fluctuations and the migration of hundreds of people, both in and out of the town. The accompanying tensions occasionally became manifest. It may seem evident that this happened when the oyster trade was hit by a crisis. However, even when business was profitable and people in general earned a good living, riots occurred. As already mentioned, initially the police force was too small to contain the germinating unrest. The fact that many villagers did not exercise self-control, partly a consequence of the insufficient exercise of power and authority, can be linked to their unfulfilled aspirations. Many migrated to the village to earn their fortune, only to meet with disappointment. Relative to successes, there were far more failures, especially after the mid-1880s. For the majority, the hope of creating an independent existence in the village remained but a dream. They vented their ensuing frustration in rebellious behavior. The fact that this happened even in times of general prosperity may seem remarkable, but one should take into account that there were considerable differences in individual success. Some gained huge profits, while others went bankrupt. Moreover, during the period of rapid demographic growth, Yerseke was a loosely-knit community. The newcomers usually had no kinship or affinal ties in their new hometown. Since there were few local institutions and associations through which they could integrate, they hardly assimilated. Furthermore, stories about the “gold of the water” attracted scores of adventurers, swindlers and welshers who showed little interest in creating a community. Relations among most villagers were weak, and this lack of social cohesion at the same time implied a lack of social control. The American anthropologist Lawrence Taylor briefly describes the developments in late nineteenth century Yerseke in his fascinating ethnohistory, *Dutchmen on the Bay*:

In the case of Yerseke, this new population arrived from the surrounding and more distant region, all these destitute Hollanders pouring into a town where employment was to be found. They lived in rooming houses, and though subject to the law of the town, they were not easily controlled by the less formal means so important to most communities. Neither wide circles of kin nor church . . . effectively controlled these new individuals (1983: 125).¹⁵

A period of rapid social change, economic crisis, or up- and downward social mobility may lead to declining social control. Durkheim dubbed such a situation – characterized by confusion and breaches of rules and norms – “anomie”, Chicago School sociologists called it “social disorganization”.

Under these circumstances, there is little co-operation, social contacts decline, and internal control with regard to the activities of group members weakens. In Yerseke, this social disorganization lasted two decades.

It was only in the course of the 1890s that the licentiousness began to wane. The "moral corruption" went against the grain of the church councils and the orthodox Calvinist rank and file who instigated a civilizing offensive, visiting apostate families and individuals and distributing religious tracts in an effort to put their cantankarous fellow villagers "on the right track". Vicars fought a battle from the pulpit against what they perceived as excesses. In their poor relief funds, the churches possessed an effective means with which to harness their poorer members. The Salvation Army also made missionary efforts. Its soldiers preached the gospel and eased needs so as to enlarge the number of their supporters. Furthermore, in the 1870s and 1880s, the councils of the *Nederlands Hervormde* and the *Christelijk Gereformeerde* churches insisted on the abolishment of the fair, which they considered a source of evil, sin and moral decay. They pointed out that the fair was often accompanied by "drunkenness, reckless gambling, the peril of contagious diseases, fights, and so on" (quoted in van Ysseldijk 1973: 169). The exertions of these religious associations proved fruitful in the course of the 1890s.

The local department of the Society for Public Welfare (*Maatschappij tot Nut van 't Algemeen*) and other institutions also contributed to these civilizing efforts. In the second half of the nineteenth century this offensive – focusing on order, respectability, industry, economy, thrift and devotion to duty (de Regt 1984: 244) – took many forms in the Netherlands. Its aim was "to instill the 'masses' with bourgeois values and standards. Tendencies to be lazy, to celebrate too merrily or engage in 'sinful' practices were to make way for virtue and respectability" (Verrips 1987: 4). People forced one another towards a more decent and regular style of life so as to become "virtuous civilians" (Kruithof 1990). These bourgeois moral interventions also had an impact in Yerseke. A part of the population sought to civilize themselves and fellow villagers in order to gain greater respectability. These attempts were not entirely unsuccessful. According to a number of villagers interviewed by a labor inspector in 1892, the consumption of alcohol was "diminishing", churches were attended "fairly regularly", and the devoutness of the village community was "reasonable". Moreover, they maintained that order and prosperity reigned in the families that went to church frequently.¹⁶ Nevertheless, the civilizing mission to some extent involved "preaching to the converted". Those who deliberately infringed the law or breached the social norms escaped from the influence of these institutions.

Probably more important than the civilizing offensive was the increasingly firmer grip of local authorities on daily affairs in the village. The municipal

council took measures in the form of regulations against public drunkenness (1875), public assembly (1878), and nude swimming (1878). Initially, the number of policemen was too small to maintain the law and many offenders were not prosecuted. But the police force was expanded, and when necessary, could call upon reinforcements from other local forces. This started off a disciplining offensive, in which law and order were tightly maintained. Even for the smallest breaches of the law, villagers were fined or detained and judges usually penalized the offenders severely. For example, two men who harassed Salvation Army soldiers were sentenced to four and eight months imprisonment respectively. However, they ran off before being confined. In 1890, forty-six people who had ignored the prohibition on public assembly were imprisoned for from five to thirty days (van Ysseldijk 1973: 304).

Fishermen, both those working as hired hands as well as the independent entrepreneurs also increasingly encountered stricter state officials and policemen. Sometimes they were fined because they had fished on private plots or had stolen oysters, but more often for minor offences, such as sailing without the required lights or registration. Adriaan Daane, who emigrated with his parents to West Sayville when nine years old, remembered:

My father once served three days in jail for failure to have a light aboard while anchored overnight in the water. A patrol boat woke him up and he told them that the wind kept blowing out the light. Anyhow he got a summons and he walked five miles to the jailhouse in the next town. He refused to pay the fine. He served his time, then walked back.¹⁷

Though oyster theft was far from extinct, the Board of Fisheries for the Zeeland Streams (*Bestuur der Visserijen op de Zeeuwse Stromen*) wrote in its 1891 annual report: "Due to the co-operation of the fishery police on the water and the police working ashore, theft of shellfish and fishing gear is on the decline in comparison with earlier years."¹⁸

With their display of power, the police forced the villagers to exert more self-control. Adriaan Daane (n.d.) wrote of the 1900s:

Every town had five to six policemen who patrolled the streets daily. They informed the people about any violations. Every family was expected to sweep their street and sidewalk daily. Every Saturday the street had to be washed, also the windows and outside walls of the house. A steamboat also patrolled the waters in the vicinity of the island. Any infractions or violations were punishable by imprisonment for a few days or a fine if you could afford it.

The combination of civilizing and disciplining offensives was effective: around the turn of the century, the village community had gradually become

less turbulent. Henceforth, the villagers contained their temper, not least as a result of tighter local government actions, policing, and growing social control.

By the end of the nineteenth century, social control increased along with the growing integration of the village community. New churches were founded and church membership was on the rise. Several voluntary associations were established in Yerseke, among them a fishermen's association, a brass band, a local branch of the Society for Public Welfare, a soccer club, a local branch of a labor union, and various religious associations. Overlapping social networks arose, bringing about a growing integration of the village community. Moreover, the migration boom was over and many Yersekers were connected to each other by kinship or affinal ties. Along with this integration, social cohesion and social control increased. People kept a watchful eye on each other and those who failed to live up to the norms, now accepted by the majority of inhabitants, fell victim to malicious backbiting. For example, those who had settled in the village penniless and in the course of time had gained riches were often suspected and overtly or covertly accused of theft. People did not need proof to punish the putative culprits by means of allusions, insinuations and gossip. If one wanted to stay in Yerseke without being stigmatized, one took good care to live up to public behavioral standards. Excesses such as those characterizing community life during the 1870s and 1880s had become exceptional.¹⁹ The former bustling "gold miners village" started to turn into a respectable rural town, where moral authority reigned supreme.

The community of Yerseke started to resemble West Sayville's community in the following way: "The West Sayville Dutch were entrepreneurially inclined individualists bound together by voluntary associations into a strong moral community" (Taylor 1983: xv). In about the same period as Yerseke witnessed its phenomenal demographic growth, the number of villagers of West Sayville also rose. However, the Long Island village did not encounter the kind of social unrest that assailed Yerseke. Migration to West Sayville usually occurred through kinship and affinal ties, leading to more effective social control on newcomers:

The incorporation of all new immigrants into the existing network of kinship meant that even if they included among their number the odd ruffian malcontent, or even criminal, such people found themselves subject to the social control of a village into whose social organization they already fit [. . .] In West Sayville . . . the oyster boom also led to a population surge, but one that was by and large limited to those who were filtered through the social relations of the existing population, so that they found an immediate place in one of the two churches and in the other formal and informal associations that so regulated local life (ibid.: 124–25).

Eventually, a similar type of social control, combined with the forceful hand of the law, gradually turned the Dutch Sodom and Gomorrah into a paragon of Calvinist "virtuousness".

Closing remarks

The view that individual behavior is influenced extensively by group norms is certainly not new in history or social science. As early as 1901 the American sociologist Edward E. Ross (1928 [1901]) distinguished two types of social influencing that can force people to conform to dominant behavioral standards. The first is conscious influencing, for instance by judicial and state authorities who can threaten to sanction those evading the rules and regulations. The second type concerns the ways in which people interact with each other in groups and other social formations, influencing their behavior unconsciously, unintentionally and informally. Both types were operative in subduing "immoral" villagers in late nineteenth century Yerseke.

However, there was also a deliberate civilizing offensive instigated by worried inhabitants. In the Netherlands, this has been a hotly debated issue among historians and sociologists who are influenced by the Eliasian School, an important stream in Dutch social science. These conscious civilizing offensives appear to be out of tune with a major proposition in Elias's work (cf. Franke 1988, 1990; Verrips 1987). For in his magnum opus *The Civilizing Process*, Elias (1978/82) stated that civilizing processes come about unintentionally and relatively autonomous, and that in these processes the human urge for distinction plays a major role. But civilizing missions would seem to imply socio-cultural levelling. The sociologist Franke observes that although societal processes cannot be understood as mere results of human intentions and expectations, this does not mean that the impact of such intentions and expectations on social processes should be ignored (1988: 125).

However, these arguments seem sterile, since Elias himself also pointed to these aspects. The civilizing *process* should not be conflated with civilizing *offensives*. Civilizing missions only occur as a particular phase of the civilizing process; that is, when certain groups become interdependent in particular ways, for example during state formation processes. As Elias noted (1978/82 I: 79), in this process "[t]he coercion exerted by people on one another increases, the demand for 'good behavior' is raised more emphatically". He also wrote that: "[t]he contrasts in conduct between the upper and lower groups are reduced with the spread of civilization; the varieties or nuances of civilized conduct are increased" (ibid. II: 255). Thus, to a certain extent, socio-cultural levelling is indeed an aspect of the civilizing process.

Civilizing offensives should not be exclusively interpreted as the imposition of dominant behavioral standards by powerful people on less powerful people (Verrips 1987: 13). The performance of civilized (or restrained) behavior has, for example, also been a means of distinction for segments of the labor class striving to imitate the bourgeois middle class, and in doing so distinguishing themselves from other sections of the labor class (de Regt 1984). Furthermore, there are also instances of "civilizing coalitions"; alliances between workers, employers and the clergy, whose joint efforts were, amongst other things, aimed at reducing alcohol consumption (Kalb 1994).

Though civilizing efforts, whether they are top-down or internal campaigns, are certainly important, the Yerseke case shows that disciplining interventions should also be taken into account. The role of this process is usually underexposed in the work of historians and social scientists adhering to the Eliasian theoretical perspective. It would seem that Ross's approach can be helpful in this respect, since he explicitly highlights the potential impact of judicial and state authorities *and* interaction on behavioral standards. Thus, in the case of Yerseke, there were three interwoven processes – civilizing missions, disciplining efforts and social integration – mutually reinforcing each other, and which within a few decades led to its transformation from a town that had become a center of social unrest into a more or less quiet and law-abiding rural community. Although it is difficult to disentangle the influence of each of these processes, the disciplining offensive probably had the most imperative impact, gaining results on a much shorter term than both other processes. The bourgeois civilizing offensive has a limited importance in so far as it affects only those who are already receptive to bourgeois behavioral standards. In this sense, it was "a kind of internal mission" (Kruithof 1980: 35). In Yerseke, it was the ongoing integration of the community, especially, which eventually forced the villagers to conform to the norms and values of the core of established inhabitants. The more tightly a community is integrated, the more effective is its social control, and the smaller the chance of internal turmoil.

Acknowledgment

I thank Jonathan Fletcher for his useful comments and editorial assistance.

Notes

1. See for example: de Regt (1984), Verrips (1987), Kruithof (1980, 1990), Franke (1988, 1990), Helsloot (1991) and Kalb (1994).
2. For a detailed description and analysis of the rise and development of shellfish farming in Yerseke and the consequences of the transition from capture to culture fishery for the

village community, see van Ginkel (1991). Research in Yerseke was conducted between January and May 1986. In addition to interviewing villagers, data were gathered through archival, local and regional newspaper research. The stories informants told were usually based on oral transmissions and not on the interviewees' observations or experiences. This may have led to some exaggeration. However, by comparing oral history with written documents I was able to reconstruct events in the village.

3. Archives of Zeeland's Provincial Library, from the collection of G.D. van Oosten, number 30.
4. *Annual Report Yerseke*, 1888.
5. See Taylor (1983), for an account of the vicissitudes of Yerseke and other Zeeland immigrants in West Sayville.
6. *Enquête door de Staatscommissie, benoemd krachtens de wet van 19 Januari 1890 (Staatsblad no. 1), gehouden te 's-Gravenhage, betreffende onderscheidene takken van bedrijf in de Eerste Arbeidsinspectie* [Labor Inspection Inquiry], 1892, p. 216.
7. Archives of Zeeland's Provincial Library, from the collection of G.D. van Oosten, number 32.
8. *Ierseksche en Thoolsche Courant*, 1 January 1886.
9. *Annual Report Yerseke*, 1882.
10. Municipal Archive of Yerseke, file 1888.
11. The incident was not without precedent. In 1881, a town-clerk was assaulted. Local officials often had a hard time. In the two decades before the turn of the century, mayors rarely held out long in the village. During this time-span, seven mayors succeeded one another.
12. *Annual Report Yerseke*, 1890. Little is known about those who were involved in the rows directed against the Salvation Army and the abolition of the fair. However, some pub landlords were ardent opponents of the fair's abolition because they would lose income. Possibly, they played the role of catalysts. For instance, the riotous crowd awaiting the municipal council's decision with respect to the fair drank free brandy by courtesy of the landlords. Undoubtedly, this did not soothe tempers.
13. *Annual Report Yerseke*, 1895.
14. *Enquête* 1892, p. 216.
15. Taylor writes that "there were too many [churches] in Yerseke in those years for anyone to exert much moral authority" (1983: 125). Here Taylor is off the mark. Most churches would only gain a foothold in the community during the 1890s.
16. *Enquête* 1892, pp. 216–217.
17. Manuscript of Adriaan Daane, entitled *History of the Daane Family* (n.d.). I thank Lawrence Taylor, who sent me a copy of this document. The original is kept in the Suffolk Marine Museum in West Sayville (U.S.A.).
18. *Verslag van den toestand der visscherijen op de Schelde en de Zeeuwsche stroomen* [Annual Report of the Zeeland Fisheries], 1891. Zeeland State Archive, Bestuur der Visscherijen, number 670.
19. Yet incidents did occur. For example, in 1904, two oyster sheds were set on fire, and in 1912, a Salvation Army soldier was injured following a street row. However, these disturbances constituted the aftermath of a rowdier era.

References

- Daane, A., "History of the Daane Family" (s.l., unpubl. ms., n.d.).
- De Regt, A., *Arbeidersgezinnen en beschavingsarbeid, ontwikkelingen 1870–1940* (Mepel/Amsterdam: Boom, 1984).
- De Rooy, P., *Werklozenzorg en werkloosheidsbestrijding 1917–1940. Landelijk en Amsterdams beleid* (Amsterdam: Van Gennip, 1979).

- Elias, N., *The Civilizing Process*. 2 Vols. Transl. E. Jephcott (Oxford: Blackwell, 1978/82 [orig. German ed. 1939]).
- Foucault, M., *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (London: Allan Lane, 1977).
- Franke, H., "Opvoeding als doelbewuste civilisering. Een penitentiair beschavingsoffensief in het interbellum," *Amsterdams Sociologisch Tijdschrift* 1988 (15), 108–130.
- Franke, H., *Twee eeuwen gevangen. Misdaad en straf in Nederland* (Utrecht: Het Spectrum, 1990).
- Helsloot, J., "De paradox van Jan Blokker: structuur en proces van beschavingsoffensieven, 15e–19e eeuw," in D. Kalb and Sytze Kingma (eds), *Fragmenten van Vermaak. Macht en plezier in the 19de and 20ste eeuw* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1991).
- Kalb, D., "On Class, the Logic of Solidarity, and the Civilizing Process," *Social Science History* 1994 (18), 127–152.
- Kruithof, B., "De deugdzame natie. Het burgerlijk beschavingsoffensief van de Maatschappij tot Nut van 't Algemeen tussen 1784 en 1860," *Symposion* 1980 (2), 22–37.
- Kruithof, B., *Zonde en deugd in domineesland. Nederlandse protestanten en problemen van opvoeding: zeventiende tot twintigste eeuw* (Groningen: Wolters-Noordhoff, 1990).
- Lasch, C., *Haven in a Heartless World. The Family Besieged* (New York: Basic Books, 1977).
- McCay, B.J., "The Pirates of Piscary: Ethnohistory of Illegal Fishing in New Jersey," *Ethnohistory* 1984 (31), 17–37.
- Ross, E.A., *Social Control. A Survey of the Foundations of Order* (New York/London: MacMillan, 1928 [orig. ed. 1901]).
- Taylor, L.J., *Dutchmen on the Bay. The Ethnohistory of a Contractual Community* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983).
- Van Ginkel, R., *Elk vist op zijn tij. Een historisch-antropologische studie van een maritieme gemeenschap, Yerseke 1870–1914* (Zutphen: De Walburg Pers, 1991).
- Van Ysseldijk, W.E.P., *1000 jaar Yerseke* (Yerseke, 1973).
- Verrips, K., "Noblemen, Farmers and Labourers. A Civilizing Offensive in a Dutch Village," *Netherlands' Journal of Sociology* 1987 (23), 3–16.