Jeffrey Tyssens

6 Schools of Decency and Discipline. Social Reform and People's Restaurants in the Low Countries (1860s–1914)

In one of the most famous songs of Bertolt Brecht's *Dreigroschenoper*, leading characters Macheath and Ginny Jenny admonish the well-to-do gentlemen who try and moralise the poor before more essential needs are fulfilled:

Now all you gentlemen who wish to lead us
Who teach us to desist from mortal sin
Your prior obligation is to feed us:
When we've had lunch, your preaching can begin.
All you who love your paunch and our propriety
Take note of this one thing (for it is late):
You may proclaim, good sirs, your fine philosophy,
But till you feed us, right and wrong can wait!¹

Were the good sirs who wanted to moralise the 19th-century poor in order to solve the epoch's social ills unaware of that basic truth of the last line in the original, “*Erst kommt das Fressen, dann kommt die Moral*”? Certainly not all of them were that naïve. One can even say that quite a large group of social reformers of very different ideological inclinations were well aware that food was a problem not only for the indigent but equally for the labouring poor. From the earliest surveys onwards² this conclusion had been reached and it is clear that this awareness was widespread. No wonder then that those who were to create the cheap popular restaurants we will study in this chapter were explicit about this part of their motivation. Dr. Camille Moreau (?–1919), a liberal physician implied in one such initiative in the Walloon industrial town of Charleroi in 1886, qualified the work-

1 Bertolt Brecht, *The Threepenny Opera. With the author's notes and a foreword by Lotte Lenya. English book by Desmond Vesey. English lyrics by Eric Bentley* (New York: Bentley, 1964), 66–67. Obviously, the German original has much more punch: “Ihr Herrn, die ihr uns lehrt, wie man brav leben / Und Sünd und Missetat vermeiden kann / Zuerst müßt ihr uns schon zu fressen geben / Dann könnt ihr reden: damit fängt es an. / Ihr, die euren Wanst und unsere Bravheit liebt / Das Eine wisset ein für allemal: / Wie ihr es immer dreht und immer schiebt / Erst kommt das Fressen, dann kommt die Moral”. See: idem, *Ausgewählte Werke in sechs Bände* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2005), III, 144.

2 Michel Bonneau, *La Table des pauvres. Cuisiner dans les villes et cités industrielles 1780–1950* (Rennes: PUR, 2013), 165–189.

ers' diet as "insufficient and in all respects contrary to hygienic laws". He was also just as straightforward about the main reason for this, i.e. a family budget that proved too low.³ But even the most daring representatives of the liberal left in the Low Countries, i.e. the social liberals in the north and the so-called "*progressistes*"⁴ in the south, both groups visibly, be it unevenly present in the food reform movement which is at stake here, hardly risked touching the free evolution of wages, that sacred cow of the 19th-century's auto-regulated market. Other means thus had to be engaged to tackle 'the social question' in order to preclude severe disruption to society as it existed.

It is well known that all kinds of social ventures were fostered and sponsored by bourgeois or middle-class reformers⁵, where usually a mix of philanthropy and self-help had to attain a gradual de-proletarianisation of the labouring classes. By inculcating thrift and virtue and by spreading sets of practical skills, organisational ones among them, a basic accumulation of property (real estate most notably) and concomitant 'conservative' life stances could be reached for the good of all. Many of these ventures, such as cooperative banking⁶, have been adequately studied. The same goes for the educational side of the matter. Indeed, the liberal left very definitely stood at the vanguard of the 'pedagogisation' of society.⁷ It is well known that their ambitions for social reform were always connected with instruction and moral uplift of one sort or another. Interestingly however, it is only occasionally that an analytical link has been made between these uplifting/reforming endeavours and the fundamental problem of the poor man's diet we mentioned at the outset.⁸

With our investigation into a particular policy of procuring processed food for the poor, as we can observe it in Belgium and the Netherlands in the last third of the 19th century, we will first of all try to show how social reformers wanted to organise modern philanthropic alternatives for charitable food distribution

3 *Gazette de Charleroi*, August 10, 1886, 2.

4 For more information on these progressive liberals, see: chapter 1/introduction to his volume.

5 For a view of the broad panoply that could be touched upon, see: Christianne Smit, *De volksverheffers. Sociaal hervormers in Nederland en de wereld 1870–1914* (Hilversum: Verloren, 2015).

6 Just one example among many: Toni Offermann, *Arbeiterbewegung und liberales Bürgertum in Deutschland 1850–1863* (Bonn: Neue Gesellschaft, 1979), 189–338.

7 Marc Depaepe, *De pedagogisering achterna. Aanzet tot een genealogie van de pedagogische mentaliteit in de voorbije 250 jaar* (Leuven: Acco, 1998). On the concept of pedagogisation/educationalisation, see: chapter 1/introduction to his volume.

8 We made some initial connections in: Jeffrey Tyssens, "Association, Patronizing and Autonomy: Belgian Masonic Lodges as Sponsors of a 'Cooperative' Movement in the 1860s and 1870s," *Journal for Research into Freemasonry and Fraternalism* 2, no. 2 (2011): 261–292. See also: Smit, *De Volksverheffers*, 261–265.

as it had existed in the past.⁹ These largely under-researched initiatives, carried out as they were by some of the usual suspects of social reform but also by a number of unexpected, sometimes even rather ambiguous actors, indicate the extent to which there is a very specific food history-component to this larger history of social reform. But they also prove how these reformers' perspectives went beyond the very basics one might expect from such down-to-earth ventures to procure poor people with cheap food. Indeed, even here, where one might least expect it, ideas of moral uplift and practical instruction of the lower classes were never far away. We will take a closer look at two cases in each of the two countries in question, cases where social reformers started cheap restaurants for labourers from the 1860s onwards. What networks of people and organisations can be identified behind these new style caterers with their cheap meals? What principles determined their modalities of functioning, as opposed to more archaic food charities? For what kind of poor were these restaurants designed? In his seminal work on the transformations of the social question, French sociologist Robert Castel incisively analysed with regard to those poor how essential a set of divisions have been (and still are) for determining particular forms of social policy, notably between the labouring and the non-labouring poor, other varieties then again existing within these groups.¹⁰ If traditional food distributions were not meant for workers but for a "*Lumpenproletariat*" of paupers, indigents, in short, for the lowest echelons of social hierarchy, was this still the case for the "*volkskaarkeukens*" or "*fourneaux économiques*" that emerged from the late 1860s, or had others been defined as the principle target group? We will then try to come to grips with the pedagogical features the reformers attached to or expected from the social catering facilities they had started.

People's restaurants in the South: The cases of Brussels and Charleroi

The wave of people's restaurants that started in Belgium in the late 1860s was largely produced by Masonic lodges. Their organisational interconnectedness enhanced a series of imitations from the original example in Brussels. Indeed, this first initiative was taken by the capital's *Amis Philanthropes* lodge, a constant

⁹ For the distinction between charity and philanthropy, see: Giovanna Procacci, *Gouverner la misère. La question sociale en France, 1789–1848* (Paris: Seuil, 1993).

¹⁰ Robert Castel, *Les métamorphoses de la question sociale* (Paris: Gallimard, 1995).

spearhead of Belgian Freemasonry as a politically and socially active force. As Masonic lodges had done since their conception, *Les Amis Philanthropes* had had their proper charity, which was traditionally organised in the form of bread donations to the urban poor on the occasion of lodge festivities. But these charitable bourgeois did not distribute bread directly: as happened more often in 19th-century Brussels, bread tickets were given to particular poor selected by a city jury that had inspected their dwellings to assess their cleanliness and orderliness.¹¹ However, these tokens to acknowledge that a certain moral standard was being respected by the potential beneficiaries did not avoid deviations of the charity system. As was reported in February 1864 by *Amis Philanthropes*-member Auguste Jones (1808–1885), a well-known carriage manufacturer of downtown Brussels and an active philanthropist, some of these tickets had recently been sold on by the beneficiaries, thus not reaching the ‘respectable’ poor the lodge had wanted to help. To obtain more of a grip upon the actual food consumption by the target group, Jones proposed dropping the ticket distribution system altogether and organising a low cost restaurant for workers and modest employees with their respective families, or the *fourneaux économiques*, as it was often called back then.¹²

But Jones himself soon doubted the feasibility of his own proposal: he had suggested a similar formula to the capital’s *Société Royale de Philanthropie* and now, he said, a Catholic political club had taken over his idea. But we have not found any trace that the latter eventually realised anything in this respect. If the Brussels *Association Constitutionnelle Conservatrice* considered such an endeavour at all, it must soon have been reminded that a Catholic charity was already in operation in the sector. The Brussels conference of the Saint-Vincent-of-Paul society had timidly broadened the food offer of an older soup kitchen and, in the early 1860s, had mobilised a French nuns’ order, the *Filles de la Sagesse*, to run it and to later open a second site.¹³ Whatever the cause of Jones’ fears, other members of *Les Amis Philanthropes*, notably the lodge’s Worshipful Master,

11 Minute Book IX, Lodge meeting of 18 February 1864, Archives Les Amis Philanthropes, Brussels, Belgium. These “*prix d’ordre et de propreté*” had been launched by liberal minister Charles Rogier (1800–1885) in 1849 and had to be attributed by municipal commissions. Brussels rewarded a first set of families in 1853. See: *L’Indépendance Belge*, July 10, 1853, 2. For the relationship between morality/respectability and orderly households, as identified by “*les visiteurs du pauvre*”, see: chapter 1/introduction to this volume.

12 Manuscript Lartigue (18 February 1864); Minute Book IX, Lodge meetings of 18 February & 10 May 1864, Archives Les Amis Philanthropes.

13 Situation des établissements de la Congrégation de la Sagesse Tome III, f° 336 e.s., FDLS HC 3, Archives of the Congrégation des Filles de la Sagesse, St.-Laurent-sur-Sèvre, France.

were adamantly in favour of effectively realising Jones' original idea, so as not to leave the sector entirely to the Catholic enemy.¹⁴ It turned out that this was to allow the lodge to profit from a gap in the capital city's philanthropy. Indeed, in the *Petit-Château* quarter of downtown Brussels, a non-denominational soup kitchen had been operating since the mid-1850s and it had also slowly come to resemble the larger *fourneaux économiques*-formula¹⁵, but, as the buildings of the *Petit-Château* kitchen were to be demolished¹⁶, an opportunity arose to fill that void. Furthermore, the catering service of the *Petit-Château* and the nuns' kitchens of Saint-Vincent-of-Paul had all kept working in a more old-fashioned manner, i.e. only in winter months (even not necessarily every year at the *Petit-Château*) and largely by means of charity coupons distributed by aristocrats to the paupers they patronised.¹⁷

The Brussels Freemasons developed a blueprint for a far more modern type of *fourneaux économiques*.¹⁸ First of all, they broke with the traditional seasonal workings of the soup kitchens (i.e. limited to about four months from December until March or April) and started a permanent catering service with a relatively large menu. It was considered of utmost importance to break with the charity formula.¹⁹ Indeed, food would no longer be donated to the poor, but processed in a market context: the meals were to be sold for cash, with large scale purchases

14 Manuscript Lartigue (10 May 1864); Minute Book IX, Lodge meeting of 10 May 1864, Archives Les Amis Philanthropes.

15 Decision of the Comité du Petit-Château, 22 November 1855; Comité des soupes, ancien Petit-Château. Rapport de la Commission administrative au Comité (Winter 1854–1855), S 112–10, Fonds Bienfaisance Publique, City Archives of Brussels, Brussels, Belgium.

16 In 1869, the *Petit-Château* committee decided not to continue its organising activities, as the building had been torn down the year before and the Freemasons' *fourneaux économiques* had become active in the quarter, but it had not been dismantled: henceforward it only distributed food tickets for other cheap restaurants. See: *L'Écho du Parlement*, December 17, 1869, 1; *L'Indépendance Belge*, February 12, 1876, 1. One of the active members of the committee, Louis Geelhand (1820–1894), who was a key figure of the *Société Royale de Philanthropie* as well, was to be coopted in the management board of the Masonic initiative.

17 For the aristocratic and Catholic involvement in the endeavour, see notably: *Journal de Bruxelles*, September 1, 1866, 2; October 23, 1881, 2. At the end of the 19th century the kitchen's coupons were still distributed by dint of the Brussels *Cercle des Nobles*. See: *Journal de Bruxelles*, December 20, 1895, 3. On the seasonality and the focus on the indigent, see: *Journal de Bruxelles*, April 9, 1863, 1; January 15, 1868, 1; March 28, 1868, 2.

18 Manuscript Lartigue (21 January 1867 until 22 February 1868), Archives Les Amis Philanthropes.

19 In a most revealing way, the word 'charity', which was still used when the lodge started discussing the matter, was completely abandoned with plans becoming more elaborate. See: Jeffrey Tyssens, "Association, Patronizing and Autonomy," 265–266.

and production making prices considerably lower than in-family provisioning and cooking could allow. The *Amis Philanthropes* lodge went a step further still. Several of the members of the lodge's commission preparing this blueprint, notably the journalist and Liberal MP Auguste Couvreur (1827–1894), had been actively involved in the *Association Internationale pour le Progrès des Sciences Sociales*²⁰, its international conferences (notably the 1863 conference of Ghent) having been important forums for spreading the idea of cooperation in liberal circles.²¹ In the conferences most participants had looked at cooperative banking (in particular at the German Schulze-Delitzsch model) but it would not take long to broaden the perspective and to align the concept of the cheap restaurant with that same model.²² A foreign example had helped to popularise the idea, i.e. the “*restaurant sociétaire*” of the French city of Grenoble as it had been founded in 1851.²³ The restaurant was well known in those days, notably by dint of a book its conceiver, Grenoble's (second republic) mayor Frédéric Taulier (1806–1861), had published on this and other social endeavours launched by the municipality's authorities.²⁴ It had gained some traction among Brussels' liberals and Freema-

20 On this important laboratory of ideas, see: Christian Müller, “Designing the Model European—Liberal and Republican Concepts of Citizenship in Europe in the 1860s: The Association Internationale pour le Progrès des Sciences Sociales,” *History of European Ideas* 26, no. (2011): 223–231; Christian Müller and Jasmien Van Daele, “Peaks of Internationalism in Social Engineering: A Transnational History of International Social Reform Associations and Belgian Agency, 1860–1925,” *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Filologie en Geschiedenis* 90, no. 4 (2012): 1301–1306; Christian Müller, “The Politics of Expertise: Association internationale pour le progrès des sciences sociales. Democratic Peace Movements and International Law Networks in Europe, 1850–1875,” in *Shaping the Transnational Sphere. Experts, Networks and Issues from the 1840s to the 1930s*, eds. Davide Rodogno, Bernhard Struck and Jakob Vogel (New York: Berghahn, 2015), 131–151. All the chapters of part III (“Transnational Connections and Circulations”) of this volume refer to the importance of the *Association Internationale pour le Progrès des Sciences Sociales*. See also: chapter 1/introduction to this volume.

21 As an MP, Couvreur would play a key role in the elaboration of legislation facilitating the creation of cooperatives. See: Jean Puissant, “La coopération en Belgique. Tentative d'évaluation globale,” *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Nieuwste Geschiedenis* 22 (1991): 35; Hendrik Defoort, *Werklieden bemint uw profijt! De Belgische sociaaldemocratie in Europa* (Leuven: Lannoo, 2006), 116.

22 The final proposition of the cooperative model seems to have come from a certain Cambier though. See: Manuscript Lartigue (21 January 1867), Archives Les Amis Philanthropes.

23 Anne Lhuissier, “Le restaurant sociétaire de Grenoble sous la Seconde République. De l'initiative politique à l'institution réformatrice,” *Revue d'Histoire du XIXe siècle* 26–27 (2003) : 85–110; Anne Lhuissier, *Alimentation populaire et réforme sociale. Les consommations ouvrières dans le second XIXe siècle* (Paris: Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, 2007).

24 Frédéric Taulier, *Le vrai livre du peuple ou le riche et le pauvre. Histoire et tableau des institutions de bienfaisance et d'instruction primaire de la ville de Grenoble* (Grenoble-Paris: Maisonneuve & Hachette, 1860).

sons as well.²⁵ Now, the *Amis Philanthropes* Masons wanted to push things even further: they would start the initiative, gather the capital and run the economic restaurant in a first period, but then the reins and the shares had to be passed to the labour class consumers themselves in order to form a genuine cooperative restaurant.²⁶

In November 1867, *Les Amis Philanthropes* approved the plans for the new social catering service and were quickly joined by the other lodge in the capital city, *Les Vrais Amis de l'Union et du Progrès Réunis*, to co-finance and collaboratively run this restaurant, aptly called *Les Ateliers Réunis*. In March 1868, the cheap eating facility was opened some hundred yards from the site where the old soup kitchen had functioned, on grounds that had been provided by Brussels' city authorities. *Les Ateliers Réunis* was to be run by a large "*Conseil de Gérance*" but mainly by a smaller "*Comité d'Administration*" led by Auguste Jones.²⁷ Most members represented their respective lodges. The list denotes a lot of the usual suspects of reform associations like the *Ligue de l'Enseignement*, the Brussels society for vocational schooling of girls and think tanks such as the *Société d'Economie Politique*. The majority clearly reflected the bourgeois composition of the capital's lodges, but not exclusively. With the presence of e.g. bronze worker Frédéric Thys (1833 – 1881), one of the rare labour aristocrats having been admitted to the *Amis Philanthropes* lodge (he was initiated in 1861), a link was made to the working men's world as well.²⁸ On the management board, the Brussels city authorities had delegated the employee Théophile Absil to cover, for some extra salary, the day-to-day administration (he later became a Freemason too).²⁹ The venture clearly met with some success. The annual sales volume was quite con-

25 The book and its ideas had been treated during a conference in the Brussels *Association Libérale* in 1867. See: *Des sociétés de consommation. Conférence donnée à l'Association Libérale de Bruxelles, le 19 février 1867, par Gustave Duchaine, Avocat près de la Cour d'Appel de Bruxelles, docteur agrégé de l'Université Libre* (Brussels: Lebègue, 1967), 30 – 31.

26 In the meantime, they had also studied the operations of the *Rochdale Pioneers*. See: Manuscript Lartigue (25 March 1867), Archives Les Amis Philanthropes.

27 *Rapport sur les opérations de Société Coopérative Alimentaire Les Ateliers Réunis. Rédigé par le Comité spécial nommé en Assemblée générale du 30 janvier 1876* (Brussels: Imprimerie bruxelloise, 1876), 36.

28 Thys was one of the main personae of the *Association Générale Ouvrière* which was to play a role in the further development of the *Ateliers Réunis*, as we will explain later. See: Éliane Gubin, Jean Puissant and Jean-Paul Mahoux, "Question sociale et libéralisme. L'exemple de l'Association Générale Ouvrière (1858 – 1920)," *Huldeboek Prof. Dr. Marcel Bots. Een bundel historische en wijsgerige opstellen*, eds. Adriaan Verhulst and Luc Pareyn (Ghent : Liberaal Archief, 1995), 151.

29 Résolution du collège, January 7, 1881/Décision du conseil communal, January 10, 1881, S113.1 Fonds Bienfaisance publique, City Archives of Brussels.

siderable. As can be judged from a report concerning its activities until 1875, in the better years the first *Ateliers Réunis* establishment sold about 150,000 portions of soup annually, more than 130,000 portions of meat and some 285,000 portions of vegetables.³⁰ This was deemed sufficient enough to consider expansion and, indeed, in 1873 and 1883 respectively, new sites were opened in the ‘Onze-Lieve-Vrouw-ter-Sneeuw’ and the ‘Marollen’ quarters.³¹ In the new distribution centers, sales would be more modest and in the original site the annual quantities of meals sold would gradually diminish as well, and it is quite likely that these *fourneaux économiques* survived mainly because they were allowed to deliver processed food to the public schools of the city.³² However, whatever the cause may have been, the restaurants managed to maintain their activities until the drastic food measures demanded by the occupation of the country during the First World War.

The *Ateliers Réunis* were definitely important because they inspired imitations of their formula by a set of other Masonic lodges and liberal networks in Belgium. Furthermore, the venture obtained quite a lot of international recognition as well: after only a year of activities, the Brussels *fourneaux économiques* were already presented to a foreign audience and received an award during an exhibition in Amsterdam. The same was to happen in 1889 in the Paris world exhibition, where the *Ateliers Réunis* again won a medal as a valuable initiative of social economy.³³ But the cheap restaurant also had to face some criticism, interestingly by some prestigious liberal protagonists of this type of social reform institution. Indeed, in his 1871 book *Des institutions et des associations ouvrières de la Belgique*, Léon d’Andrimont (1836–1905), the ideologue of cooperative bank-

³⁰ *Rapport sur les opérations de la Société Coopérative Alimentaire Les Ateliers réunis*, 19.

³¹ *Bulletin Communal de Bruxelles* (1872, I), 318; Eugène Van Bommel, *Patria Belgica. Encyclopédie nationale* (Brussels: Bruylant, 1873), 192; *L’Indépendance Belge*, August 10, 1883, 2; Antoine & Yvon Leblicq, “Quelques souvenirs d’une enfance dans le quartier bruxellois des bas-fonds au début du XXe siècle,” *Cahiers Bruxellois* 49, no. 1 (2017): 325. For some time in the 1880s, a site was also opened near the factories in the channel vicinity just outside town, but this facility did not last long. See: *Journal de Bruxelles*, January 1, 1885, 2.

³² *Bulletin Communal de Bruxelles* (1896, II), 421.

³³ *Exposition Internationale d’Economie Domestique à Amsterdam 1869. Rapports du Comité Central de l’Association et des Jurys de l’Exposition* (The Hague: Imprimerie de l’Etat, 1869), 384, 378–379, 452–454, 766–774; *Exposition universelle de Paris 1889. Section belge. Groupe XI. Economie sociale. Section IX. Associations coopératives de consommation. Rapport présenté par M. Odon Laurent* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1889), 38–41; *Exposition Universelle de 1889, à Paris. Liste des récompenses* (Paris, Imprimerie Nationale, 1889), 755, 774; *Exposition Universelle Internationale de 1889 à Paris. Rapports du jury international publiés sous la direction de M. Alfred Pirard. Groupe de l’Economie sociale* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1889), II, 129, 135–136.

ing in Belgium, pointed out the weak spot of the *Atelier Réunis* formula: i.e. the cooperative part of the story. Indeed, the organisers hardly found any labourers-consumers to become shareholders. Hence, the restaurants remained only cooperative in name.³⁴ The lodge had already made the same observation before³⁵ but did not really find a solution. This only changed in 1886–1887 when the managing Freemasons eventually succeeded in attaining an agreement with the *Association Générale Ouvrière*, a kind of liberal labour society of qualified workers, to finally secure a cooperative reconversion of the *Ateliers Réunis*.³⁶

Of the imitations of the *Ateliers Réunis* by Freemasons in other cities in Belgium, the one in Charleroi was one of the most interesting, even if it was a rather late initiative. Although the records of the lodge were lost during the Second World War, we can nevertheless confirm that the local *Charité* lodge was indeed behind a local cooperative restaurant that was founded in 1886.³⁷ The lodge had already paid attention to social matters for quite some time³⁸, but it is likely that the strikes and eruptions of violence stirring the Walloon industrial regions in March 1886 (the Charleroi vicinity being particularly touched by them³⁹) had been a strong incentive to proceed. It is well known that the 1886 events had been a major shock to Belgian bourgeois society (however much it had been warned, by the *progressiste* liberals notably, that this kind of explosion was in the offing) and eventually led to a first wave of social legislation.⁴⁰ Less attention

34 Léon d'Andrimont, *Des institutions et des associations ouvrières de la Belgique* (Brussels: Lebègue, 1871), 308.

35 It was mentioned by Gustave Jottrand (1830–1906), one of the members of the “*Conseil de gérance*”: “we don’t succeed in placing shares in the hands of the labourers”. See: Manuscript Lartigue (March 26, 1870), Archives Les Amis Philanthropes.

36 *L’Indépendance Belge*, July 28, 1886, 1; Gubin, Puissant and Mahoux, “Question sociale et libéralisme. L’exemple de l’Association Générale Ouvrière,” 158–159.

37 The fact was explicitly mentioned during a commemorative ritual in 1893 by Léopold Fagnart (1849–1899), a left-wing liberal MP and active lodge member who had been implicated in the venture himself. See: *Bulletin du Grand Orient de Belgique 1892–1893* (Brussels: Grand Orient de Belgique), 130. On Fagnart, see: *Biographie Nationale. Volume 39* (Brussels: Académie Royale de Belgique, 1976), 349–361.

38 As the Worshipful Master of the lodge, it was precisely Fagnart who inspired intense study of the matter. See his masonic obituary in: *Bulletin du Grand Orient de Belgique 1899* (Brussels: Grand Orient de Belgique), 362.

39 There had been looting all around. In neighboring Jumet, a large manor had been set ablaze. In Roux, the army had fired on the crowds, causing several casualties. If Charleroi itself was less effected, a climate of fear reigned in the city. See: Pierre-Jean Schaeffer, *Charleroi, 1830–1994, histoire d’une métropole* (Ottignies: Quorum, 1994), 117; *L’Indépendance Belge*, March 27, 1886, 2; March 28, 1886, 2; March 30, 1886, 2.

40 Marinette Bruwier e.a., 1886. *La Wallonie née de la grève?* (Brussels: Labor, 1990).

though has been given to local responses and it is precisely in this frame that the Charleroi *Société Coopérative d’Alimentation Économique* must be understood. High food prices had already gained liberal attention before⁴¹, but now an encompassing solution was advanced. On 29 August 1886 a provisional committee distributed a letter announcing the creation of new *fourneaux économiques* in Charleroi. The group solicited disinterested financial participation to the initiative that had to serve “this so interesting class of our labourers” (sic) and convened a public meeting for early August 1886.⁴²

If individual working class family budgets were not sufficient for adequate food, cooperation was deemed to be the solution. The goal was clear: a first restaurant with a take-away service, modelled on the ones working with such “vitality” in Brussels, Liège, Namur and Antwerp, had to offer “sane” and “substantial” food “at the best possible market conditions” to the workers.⁴³ The initiators had visited the *Ateliers Réunis* in Brussels and were very much inspired by their methods. It was immediately made clear that in the first five years of activity no dividends were to be expected by the stockholders: possible profits would be deposited in a reserve fund and ultimately reinvested in new sections of the restaurant. After those first five years, 60 per cent of the profits would go towards dividends, with the remaining 40 per cent still being deposited in the reserve fund. The shares were presumed to be of a sufficiently low cost (5 fr.) for workers to be able to buy them and get access to the direction of the initiative. The managing committee’s members were not to receive any financial retribution for their activity.⁴⁴ The first eating facility, with a hall for 80 diners, was opened mid-October 1886 in a northern working class suburb of the city. In its first weeks of functioning, it was considered to be an outright success.⁴⁵

⁴¹ In 1885, meat prices were judged to be excessive (and blamed upon tacit price manipulations by the butchers collectively) and led to the idea of creating a low-price cooperative butchery (these “*boucheries économiques*” existed in other Belgian towns) but that proposition did not work out. See: *Gazette de Charleroi*, December 22, 1885, 2; August 5, 1886, 2; August 8, 1886, 1.

⁴² *Gazette de Charleroi*, August 4, 1886, 3.

⁴³ *Gazette de Charleroi*, August 4, 1886, 3.

⁴⁴ *Gazette de Charleroi*, August 4, 1886, 3; August 9, 1886, 2; August 10, 1886, 2–3; November 12, 1886, 2.

⁴⁵ At least sufficiently so as to incite neighboring municipalities like Châtelet and Dampremy to imitate the example. More precise data on these *fourneaux économiques* are largely lacking however. The Charleroi organisers quickly considered opening new branches in Charleroi itself. See: *Gazette de Charleroi*, November 12, 1886, 2; November 15, 1886, 2; November 20, 1886, 2; December 6, 1886, 2; December 17, 1886, 2; December 18, 1886, 2; December 23, 1886, 2; December 29, 1886, 2; January 15, 1887, 2.

The provisional committee consisted significantly of *La Charité* members, all of whom belonged to the urban middle and upper middle levels of society: teachers, lawyers, physicians, engineers, industrialists.⁴⁶ It was headed by the lodge's Worshipful Master Léopold Fagnart (1849–1899), but the main administrative force was definitely Emile Tumelaire (1849–1927), an *athénée* teacher who later played a key role in the organisation of politically non-aligned mutual aid societies. Tumelaire was assisted by Charles Allard (1847–1913), Charleroi's city secretary, and Dr. Camille Moreau, a leading figure in the city's medical world and a representative of the country's hygienic movement. At the first meeting the committee was enlarged. Clearly, the same liberal and Masonic circles were well represented, but at that stage one Catholic politician was present as well, the later Christian-Democratic minister Michel Levie (1851–1939).⁴⁷ However, the liberal presence must have been too strong for his taste, as he only appeared once in this context. The final management board and the financial control commission still mirrored the original group of initiators, although now with the big industrialist and banker Louis Biourge (1829–1907) as the board's president and, interestingly, also with one miner, Géréme Petit, as a member.

The composition of the subsequent committees showed how much the economical restaurant was embedded in an associative network linking Masonic and liberal spheres (notably the *Jeune Garde Libérale*). A number of public institutions of Charleroi were well represented and even more significant was the link to a broad set of charitable, social and adult education societies, where one invariably sees a set of names coming back time and again (Emile Tumelaire being at the heart of the network). First of all this included a number of city councilors and the city secretary, plus members of the administrative boards and staff members of the city hospital, the *athénée* and even the municipal abattoir. The principal organisers of the Charleroi kitchen were also board members of the *Société des Conférences de l'Ecole Industrielle* (later: *Société des Conférences Populaires*), an "*oeuvre de moralisation populaire*" established since the 1870s⁴⁸, where prop-

⁴⁶ The fragmentary data we dispose of (membership rosters having disappeared) already showed that 5 of the 15 committee members belonged to *La Charité* and one was initiated some years later. It is more than probable that the actual number was considerably higher. See: Correspondence La Charité-Grand Orient de Belgique, Boxes lodge correspondence, 16, Centre de Documentation Maçonnique, Brussels, Belgium.

⁴⁷ Levie was to be active in the local Catholic cooperative *Les Ouvriers Réunis* as of 1891. See: Jean Levie, *Michel Levie (1851–1939) et le mouvement chrétien social de son temps* (Leuven: Nauwelaerts, 1962), 124–143.

⁴⁸ Maurits De Vroede e.a., *Bijdragen tot de geschiedenis van het pedagogisch leven in België. Deel I. De periodieken 1817–1878* (Ghent-Leuven: Universitaire Pers, 1973), 535–546.

agenda was produced in favour of the cooperative restaurant. The same goes for the charitable societies *Cercle Liégeois* and *Concorde* (which sometimes raised funds in favour of the dining facility) and the *Cercle de l'Oeuvre de Vêtements* of nearby Gilly. Some of the restaurant's board members appear in the local *Comité de Patronage des Habitations Ouvrières*. This is even more the case for the local mutual aid society *L'Espérance*, founded – once again – by the ever present Tumelaire⁴⁹ shortly after the restaurant: here again, a considerable overlap can be observed⁵⁰, notably with regard to the labour class members.⁵¹

The initiative did not please everybody however, a fact that would have important consequences. If the socialists globally seemed quite in favour⁵², the *fourneaux économiques* met resistance from some local small food sellers⁵³ and more particularly from boarding house keepers in the quarter where the restaurant was initially located. The latter's collective action seems to have wrecked the first initiative: indeed, reacting to this unwelcome competition, boarding house keepers obliged their boarders to take their meals (at higher prices) at their boarding houses or else denied them lodging.⁵⁴ This proved to be an effective strategy. If the *fourneaux économiques* seem to have been well frequented in their earliest days⁵⁵, already by 1887 the clientele gradually abandoned them and a move had to be considered. In that same year, the committee opened a new experimental kitchen in an abandoned public building in the south of the

49 On his role in this field, see: Francis Poty, *Charleroi* (Brussels: Présence et Action Culturelles, 1985) (Mémoire ouvrière, 3), 40–41.

50 *Gazette de Charleroi*, January 5, 1885, 2; November 9, 1885, 2; December 1, 1885, 2; October 10, 1886, 2; October 15, 1886, 2; November 15, 1886, 2; May 31, 1888, 2; October 29, 1889, 2; June 24, 1890, 2; January 21, 1891, 2; July 13, 1891, 2.

51 That goes for Edouard Falony (1861–1939), and also for his fellow miner and predecessor on the kitchen's original board, Gérémie (or Jérémie) Petit. See: *Gazette de Charleroi*, May 31, 1888, 2. It is quite striking that *L'Espérance* was first active in the same quarter of the city where the *fourneaux économiques* had their earliest base. See: *Gazette de Charleroi*, January 21, 1890, 2.

52 That was notably the case for the Charleroi high school teacher and journalist Eugène Hins (1839–1923). This former militant of the First International, also a Mason of the *Charité* lodge, used his *Au courant de la plume* columns (signed as *Diogène*) in the *Gazette de Charleroi* to give his support. See: *Gazette de Charleroi*, August 8, 1886, 1. On Hins' journalism, see: Marc Mayné, *Eugène Hins: une grande figure de la Première Internationale en Belgique* (Brussels: Académie Royale de Belgique, 1994), 203. In a later stage, young miner and unionist Edouard Falony, the later socialist MP, became member of the management board. Just like Jérémie Petit, Falony was in the first team leading the *L'Espérance* mutual aid society. See: *Gazette de Charleroi*, October 4, 1888, 2; January 21, 1890, 2.

53 *Gazette de Charleroi*, July 3, 1887, 2.

54 *Gazette de Charleroi*, July 12, 1893, 2.

55 *Gazette de Charleroi*, November 15, 1886, 2.

city, apparently again with some success in the early stages of activity.⁵⁶ But then again, the building had to be cleared in 1890 and the restaurant had to move, this time to a former hotel.⁵⁷ The precious little data we have on the restaurant's finances show that already by 1887 the restaurant had only broken even because a local theatre had organised a charity performance on its behalf.⁵⁸ In 1888 and 1889, the kitchen had to cope with losses, mainly because of the problems with the original northern suburb branch.⁵⁹ In the meantime, the shift to a cooperative did not function either, as the organisers complained:

The 'Conseil d'Administration', however willing to do the good, cannot substitute itself to the necessary action of the cooperators. It can only trace the road and manage your interest with thrift. But it is not entitled to impose zeal and activity upon the other society members.⁶⁰

If the organisers hoped that a final move to a permanent location would solve these problems,⁶¹ it seems to have been an illusion, however much local charity tried to support the *fourneaux économiques*. In 1892, dissolution was considered for the first time and in May 1893, when the last funds had been spent, the committee decided to do just that.⁶² At the same time, the Masonic core of the committee had opted not to drop its philanthropic endeavours altogether, but to re-orient them to what at first sight might seem to have been a more traditionally charitable venture that would operate on a smaller scale. Already in the summer of 1893, i.e. a month or two at most after the kitchen's closure, exactly the same network organised a centre which offered refuge to wandering labourers during the night, the *Oeuvre de l'Hospitalité de Nuit*⁶³, and quickly added a new food related charity to it, the *Bouchée de Pain*, that was to provide the lodgers with bread and soup.⁶⁴ As with the older style food charities, the initiative only func-

⁵⁶ *Gazette de Charleroi*, June 6, 1887, 2; July 23, 1887, 2

⁵⁷ *Gazette de Charleroi*, October 15, 1890, 4.

⁵⁸ *Gazette de Charleroi*, October 31, 1887, 2.

⁵⁹ *Gazette de Charleroi*, October 24, 1889, 2.

⁶⁰ *Gazette de Charleroi*, October 26, 1889, 2.

⁶¹ *Gazette de Charleroi*, October 26, 1889, 2.

⁶² *Gazette de Charleroi*, July 16, 1887, 4; May 9, 1893, 3; July 12, 1893, 2.

⁶³ A similar centre had operated in the mid-1880s but eventually seems to have stopped working. See: *Gazette de Charleroi*, November 6, 1886, 2.

⁶⁴ *Gazette de Charleroi*, July 21, 1893, 2; November 9, 1893, 2; November 18, 1893, 2; November 17, 1894, 1; April 13, 1895, 2; January 22, 1896, 2; October 23, 1898, 1–2. In harsh winters, the food distributions were extended to all the poor that presented themselves at the centre's building. See: *Gazette de Charleroi*, January 9, 1895, 1.

tioned in the winter months. Interestingly however, the same committee completed its double charity with a more innovative third panel, the *Bourse du Travail*, which was to act as an employment office, notably for the wandering labourers (foreigners quite often) that were sheltered by the centre.⁶⁵

People's Restaurants in the North: the Cases of Rotterdam and Leiden

The pioneering Dutch *volksgaarkeuken* was not created by an association or an associative network (as would usually be the case later on) but by an individual food reformer, be it one with a rather dubious profile. Frederik Nysiemus Boer (1818–1915) had started his career in the military, but when he resigned as a Lieutenant in 1851⁶⁶ and quickly married a salesman's daughter in Breda⁶⁷, his last city of encampment, he became active in food commerce in Rotterdam. He first acted as an accountant. Then, in 1853, he became an independent salesman and in 1860, he associated with a son of Johannes (or "Jan") Hendrik Nieuwenhuijs, an important Amsterdam tin can manufacturer⁶⁸, to engage in similarly modern forms of food trade, notably by merchandising all kinds of preserved food (dried, pickled, canned etc.) for colonial markets and ship crew provisions. It is quite probable that Boer's reconversion to the food business was not entirely unconnected with his earlier military activity: indeed, he had been a "*fourier*" for three and a half years⁶⁹, i.e. a non-commissioned officer responsible for a company's accounts, the quartering of the troops and, notably, for the distribution of food tickets.⁷⁰ His catering business career was not an overall success though.

⁶⁵ Els Deslé, *Arbeidsbemiddeling en/of werklozencontrole: het voorbeeld van de Gentse arbeidsbeurs (1891–1914)* (Brussels: Gemeentekrediet, 1991), 45.

⁶⁶ *Nederlandsche Staats-Courant*, februari 12, 1851, 1.

⁶⁷ Act number 35, Huwelijksregister 1851, 2 May 1851, Archief ambtenaar van de Burgerlijke Stand Breda, City Archives Breda, Breda, the Netherlands (accessible via www.openarch.nl).

⁶⁸ *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant*, May 21, 1853, 4; November 11, 1854, 4; December 15, 1855, 4; February 6, 1860, 5; March 19, 1865, 2; March 22, 1865, 4. For the Nieuwenhuijs family, see: *Nederland's Patriciaat. Vol. XXXII* (The Hague: Centraal Bureau voor Genealogie en Heraldiek, 1946), 190–194.

⁶⁹ Stamboeken Officieren 1814–1929, f° 18, Stamboeken der Officieren van de Koninklijke Landmacht en van de koloniale troepen in Nederland, 1814–1940, 375, National Archives, The Hague, the Netherlands.

⁷⁰ For a detailed overview, as noted in the *Pligten van den soldaat, korporaal, fourier, sergeant en sergeant-majoor*, published in: *Bijvoegsel tot het Staatsblad en Officieel Journal van het Koninkrijk der Nederlanden (...), Tweede deel, vierde en laatste stuk* (Dordrecht: Blussé & van Braam,

His first enterprise ended in bankruptcy in 1856. He was fired as an accountant in another one. Later on, he had to combine his activities at Nieuwenhuijs with endeavours in the banking and ship equipment sectors.⁷¹ Eventually, in 1876, a rather serious forgery affair led to his condemnation in court, a prison sentence of six years and the liquidation of his companies.⁷² After his release, Boer relocated to Almelo (and to its vicinity later on), far from the western port city where his reputation was irretrievably spoilt, and tried to reinvent himself as a small entrepreneur, trading notably in breakfast biscuits and cattle insurance until an advanced age.⁷³

The reason why Rotterdam was the first Dutch city where a modern type of *volkskaarkeuken* was launched seems to have been related to an important event in the city's medical history. Even if the sources are quite vague on Boer's actual inspiration, it is quite likely that he picked up the idea from a plea in favour of such a social catering service by a commission the city council had charged with day-to-day measures to cope with the severe cholera epidemic that raged in 1866 and that mainly affected the poorest parts of the population.⁷⁴ In November 1866, the commission (composed of the mayor, some city councilors and a team of physicians) presented a report suggesting preventive actions to physically strengthen the population and diminish potential infection. Based on English and German precedents, the commission suggested ameliorating the popular diet, specifically by creating *volkskaarkeukens*. This had to be done through private initiatives however, not by the public authorities themselves. Logically the commission welcomed Boer's subsequent initiative.⁷⁵

But was Boer's cheap restaurant indeed a disinterested, purely philanthropic endeavour? He had surely been engaged in several charitable actions before⁷⁶

1821), 1855–1857. See also: H.M.F. Landolt, *Militair woordenboek voor Nederlanders bewerkt* (Leiden: Sythoff, 1861), I, 157.

⁷¹ *Nederlandsche Staats-Courant*, January 16, 1853, 5; *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant*, January 12, 1856, 3; May 20, 1857, 3; June 15, 1857, 4; *Utrechtsch Provinciaal en Stedelijk dagblad*, March 12, 1866, 2; *Het bijblad van De Economist*, 1865, 402.

⁷² *Leidsch Dagblad*, November 22, 1876, 2; *Sumatra-Courant*, October 13, 1877, 3; *Nederlandsche Staats-Courant*, September 13, 1877, 5; *Weekblad van het Recht*, March 2, 1879, 2–3.

⁷³ *Provinciale Overijsselsche en Zwolsche Courant*, December 24, 1891, 4; September 19, 1898, 10.

⁷⁴ Bernard Woelderink, "De cholera-epidemie van 1866 in Rotterdam," *Rotterdams Jaarboekje* 7, no. 4 (1966): 302–318.

⁷⁵ *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant*, November 1866, 1, annex; *Verslag van de Commissie ter zake van de Aziatische Cholera te Rotterdam in het jaar 1867* (Rotterdam: van Waesberge & Zoon, 1868), 5.

⁷⁶ Boer was behind food donations during earlier cholera epidemics and collected money for the *Werkinrigting voor Hulpbehoevende Blinden*. See: *Rotterdamsche Courant*, September 29, 1853,

and some observers of his catering experiment qualified him as “*een ondernemend man en oprecht menschenvriend*”.⁷⁷ But we do have a suspicion nevertheless that Boer was eventually more of an “*ondernemend man*” than merely a “*menschenvriend*”, i.e. more of an entrepreneur than a philanthropist. First of all, his *volksgaarkeuken*, which started in September 1867, functioned under the aegis of his Nieuwenhuijsen firm, a formula that was completely at odds with the one taken by all the later kitchens.⁷⁸ As we have seen, this company was mainly selling dried vegetables, i.e. exactly what Boer used for the mass production of soups which, at least until the early 1870s, constituted 70 per cent of the food his kitchen sold.⁷⁹ We know as well that in that same time period, Boer was consulting with the military regarding large scale catering and tried to promote the use of (his?) dried vegetables in the army’s soup kitchens.⁸⁰ Might this suggest that Boer was actually more concerned with profit than social reform? Boer prided himself with having more noble goals. In an early report on his catering activities, he suggested that he had even considered organising his *volksgaarkeuken* as a cooperative. There are no indications however that Boer was otherwise much engaged in this kind of social endeavour. It is not impossible that he knew of the initiative that had been studied for quite some time by the Brussels Freemasons and that was to be started some months after his own: indeed, Boer was a liberal and a Freemason.⁸¹ But he does not seem to have pushed very hard in that direction.⁸² A later tentative effort to raise capital for an enlarged “NV”, a “*Naamloze Genootschap*”, does not appear to have materialised either.⁸³ It is quite striking as well that the moderate profits Boer seems to have made from his social catering service did cause some gossip in town. Certainly not everyone

4; February 22, 1860, 4. He had also been decorated for his good deeds during the floods of 1861. See: *Dagblad van Zuidholland en 's-Gravenhage*, September 25, 1861, 2.

77 *De hoofdartikelen der Twentsche Courant 1870* (Arnhem: Thieme, 1871), 16.

78 *Handelingen en Mededelingen – Nederlandsche Maatschappij voor Nijverheid en Handel*, 1874, 139. There seems to be one other exception to that rule: the popular restaurant Boer opened himself in Delft until its take-over in 1870. See: *Delftsche Courant*, December 5, 1869, 4; April 10, 1870, 4.

79 *Handelingen en Mededelingen – Nederlandsche Maatschappij voor Nijverheid en Handel*, 1874, 139.

80 *Middelburgsche Courant*, March 8, 1868, 2; “Het menage beheer bij het 2de regiment infanterie,” *Militaire Spectator*, 1868, 620; *Militaire Spectator*, 1869, 440; Frederik N. Boer, *Open brief aan de WelEdel. Gestr. Heer M. W.C. Gori* (Rotterdam: Van Meurs & Stufkens, 1869), 7.

81 *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant*, January 17, 1868, 3; *Maçonniek Weekblad*, September 9, 1872, 3.

82 Frederik N. Boer, *Een Woord voor het Volk bij den naderenden winter. Tot de gegoeden dezer stad* (Rotterdam: Nijgh, 1869), 4.

83 *Nieuws van den Dag*, August 22, 1871, 2; *De Maasbode*, October 17, 1871, 3.

was as convinced of Boer's altruism as Boer was himself. For his detractors, the *volksgaarkeuken* must have been a mere commercial venture in philanthropic disguise.⁸⁴

Whatever may have been the case, Boer did claim that with his new endeavour he wanted to improve the workingman's lot by offering cheap processed food. It is clear that at the start his *volksgaarkeuken* hardly differed from the old-style soup kitchens or "*soepkokerijen*". In the first weeks of its activities in autumn 1867, only soup was sold and the offer was limited to a take-away service. About a month later, however, a dining room was opened and the menu was gradually broadened in the following months. From the summer of 1868 onwards, six different plates were on offer permanently. An experiment with deliveries of the processed food to other sites seems to have been stopped quite rapidly due to lack of success.⁸⁵ But the central kitchen continued to work and eventually expanded spectacularly. In the first year of activity, more than 106,000 portions were sold. The second year this rose to 120,000 portions. But in the third year of activity (September 1869–September 1870), almost 320,000 portions were sold, i.e. the scale that was to be more or less maintained over the next years.⁸⁶

It is thus no wonder that Boer's kitchen, whether genuinely philanthropic in purpose or not, raised quite some interest. A "*Modelgaarkeuken*" ('model restaurant') of his was shown during the 1868 Arnhem exposition of Dutch industry and art.⁸⁷ Boer's restaurant was included in the catalogue of the 1869 Amsterdam household infrastructure exhibition (but eventually not presented).⁸⁸ Documentation on its functioning was even included in the 1876 world fair in Philadelphia.⁸⁹ Many of the cheap restaurants that were created in the Netherlands in those years were directly and explicitly modelled on the one conceived by

⁸⁴ Frederik N. Boer, *Een Woord voor het Volk*, 6–7.

⁸⁵ The opening of other dining halls in Rotterdam also met with an uneven response. See: *De Maasbode*, October 17, 1870, 3; July 23, 1872, 4.

⁸⁶ These figures do not include the food offered for free (a limited amount), nor the meals sold to the military for about a month in 1868. See: Frederik N. Boer, *Een Woord voor het Volk*, 8; *De Economist*, 1870, Part II, 1087; *Handelingen en Mededelingen – Nederlandsche Maatschappij voor Nijverheid en Handel*, 1874, 139.

⁸⁷ *Arnhemsche Courant*, March 31, 1870, 2.

⁸⁸ *Internationale tentoonstelling van voorwerpen voor de huishouding en het bedrijf van den handwerksman. Amsterdam – 1869. Algemeene Catalogus* (Amsterdam: Schadd, 1869), 3; *Dagblad van Zuidholland en 's-Gravenhage*, August 31, 1869, 904; *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant*, September 14, 1869, 1.

⁸⁹ *International Exhibition, Philadelphia 1876. Special Catalogue of the Netherland Section; Edited by authority of the Royal Commission of the Netherlands* (Amsterdam: van der Post, 1876), 69.

Figure 6.1: People's restaurant in Rotterdam, organised by Frederik Nysiemus Boer, ca. 1867 (picture included in Frederik N. Boer, *Open brief aan de WelEdel. Gestr. Heer M.W.C. Gori* [1869]).

Boer. He was very often invited as a consultant on the new ventures or was even included on the teams of founders or elected as a 'member-advisor' of management boards, as e.g. in The Hague.⁹⁰ Later he even consulted for the Ghent Freemasons when they were following the model for their own city.⁹¹ By contrast to the individual Rotterdam pioneer, however, the subsequent *volkskaarkeukens* were always the product of a collective initiative of philanthropists who were usually related to older societies, which had some interest in this social catering service. As one might expect, one could often meet the *Maatschappij tot Nut van het Algemeen* ('Society for Public Welfare'), which was already well known for its educational activities and savings banks. The *Nut* was notably the creator of a restaurant that functioned in Amsterdam for more than a century.⁹² The other one was the *Nederlandsche Maatschappij ter Bevordering van Nijverheid en Handel* ('Dutch Society for Promoting Industry and Trade'), a forum of industrialists and academics who were taking an active interest in social matters in the early

⁹⁰ Minute Book Direction 's-Gravenhaagsche Volksgaarkeukens, 27 December 1869, 3, Archief 's-Gravenhaagsche Volksgaarkeuken, City Archives of The Hague, The Hague, the Netherlands; *Statuten van de Naamloze Vennootschap 's-Gravenhaagsche Volksgaarkeukens* (S.l.: s.n., 1870), 1, 6.

⁹¹ Minute Book La Liberté 1866–1872, 1 and 21 December 1870, 1.0540, Moscou Records, Centre de Documentation Maçonnique; *Het Volksbelang*, February 25, 1871, 3.

⁹² I.H.v.E., "De volkskaarkeukens in Amsterdam," *Amstelodamum* (January 1961): 112.

1870s as well. This society was the the driving force behind the cheap restaurant in Utrecht notably.⁹³

A very revealing example of a *volksgaarkeuken* following the examples of Rotterdam and The Hague is the people's restaurant in the university town of Leiden, particularly because of its origins in the hygienic movement of the day. Indeed, the idea behind it had matured in the *Vereeniging tot Verbetering van de Volksgezondheid te Leiden* ('Association for the Promotion of Public Health'), a hygienist society founded and led by university professor Johannes A. Boogaard (1823–1877), a Berlin educated physician.⁹⁴ Boogaard had succeeded in attracting a number of notable citizens to launch his initiative during a meeting in the building of the local department of the *Nut*.⁹⁵ The founding committee was composed of judges such as the kitchen's first president Fokko B. Coninck Liefsting (1827–1913), who later acceded to the country's highest court, lawyers like Coenraad Cock (1827–1908) or liberal academics like Joan T. Buys (1828–1893), people who were also often city councilors. A number of the founding members were employers with interesting profiles in social matters, such as Samuel Le Poole (1834–1891). Most of them were connected with all kinds of charities⁹⁶ and some of them, like Le Poole in particular, had distinguished themselves some years before by making a public request to the king in favour of limiting child labour.⁹⁷ The idea of opening a *volksgaarkeuken* had already been considered as early as March 1867, shortly after the foundation of the public health association.⁹⁸ But it took a while to mature. In 1868 and 1869, the people's restaurants of Rotterdam and The Hague were visited by Coninck Liefsting and then the project became more concrete.⁹⁹ A public appeal for

⁹³ *Handelingen en Mededelingen – Nederlandsche Maatschappij voor Nijverheid en Handel*, 1874, 139.

⁹⁴ On Boogaard and his role in the hygienic movement with his Leiden society, see: Eduard S. Houwaart, *De hygiënist. Artsen, staat & volksgezondheid in Nederland 1840–1890* (Groningen: Historische Uitgeverij, 1991), 328; L. Barendrecht, "De Vereniging tot Verbetering van de Volksgezondheid te Leiden, 1867–1900. Milieu-activisme en elitaire sociale bewogenheid in de tweede helft van de negentiende eeuw," *Jaarboek der Sociale en Economische Geschiedenis van Leiden en omstreken* 7 (1995): 103–127.

⁹⁵ *Leydse Courant*, August 8, 1870, 1.

⁹⁶ Interesting data on their networks in the charitable sector can be found on the fascinating site *Het Leidse Pluche*: <https://www.oudleiden.nl/intro-pluche>, last modified October 3, 2007.

⁹⁷ Cor Smit, "Actie of onderzoek? De activiteiten van de Maatschappij ter bevordering van de Nijverheid en de Hervormde Diaconie tegen kinderarbeid," *Jaarboek der Sociale en Economische Geschiedenis van Leiden en omstreken* 6 (1994): 49–97.

⁹⁸ *Leydse Courant*, December 20, 1871, 3.

⁹⁹ *Verslagen van de Vereeniging tot Verbetering van de Volksgezondheid te Leiden II* (Leiden: Sijthoff, 1870), 14.

potential investors was made in June 1870.¹⁰⁰ The economic restaurant opened in January 1871 in a converted warehouse on the Oude Rijn in the city center.¹⁰¹

The initiative was not a tremendous success however. Already by 1871, after just a couple of months of activity, a rumour was spreading that the *volksgaarkeuken* was to close down.¹⁰² Apparently, the initiative had been met with hostility by some small shopkeepers who felt their trade threatened. Furthermore, the restaurant did not really seem to have a very good start with business figures remaining rather modest. After a while, the location of the restaurant was judged to be far from ideal, as the organisers found that they did not really reach their labour class target group, not even with the cheaper take-away offer.¹⁰³ Did workers have too little time to come to the cheap restaurant, as some presumed? Was it too far from their dwellings or places of employment? For some time the *volksgaarkeuken* experimented with a specially adapted food cart, transporting about 200 warmed-up portions, first to different locations in town, then only to a working class neighbourhood in the north of the city. But this did not really work out either. After about a year, the transport experiment was stopped.¹⁰⁴ Now and then, the press highlighted the rather weak accomplishments of the *Leidsche Volksgaarkeuken* in comparison to the others, in particular those in larger cities, but even the ones active in smaller towns like Groningen did a lot better. Those complaints seem to have come from stockholders who had invested in the kitchen's capital but only saw very moderate returns (in the more successful restaurants the dividend was usually about 5 per cent in Leiden; the by-laws had limited dividends to 4 per cent but sometimes only 2 per cent was paid out, sometimes even nothing at all).¹⁰⁵ The annual accounts showed that the number of portions sold was systematically decreasing. A fixed amount was purchased

100 *Leidsch Dagblad*, June 15, 1870, 1.

101 *Leydse Courant*, October 10, 1870, 3.

102 *Leydse Courant*, April 18, 1871, 2.

103 The take-away version of a portion that was consumed on site at 10 cts. was also sold two, then (because of the losses this price difference caused) one cent cheaper. See: *Leidsche Volkskeuken. Tarief der Spijzen vanaf 1e April 1872*, Folio Circulaires, LB 78041 and *Notulen der bestuursvergaderingen*, 18 March 1872, f° 21 v°; 10 January 1872, f° 20, 1, Archief NV Leidsche Volkskeuken (1870–1882), Erfgoed Leiden en Omstreken, Leiden, the Netherlands.

104 *Notulen der bestuursvergaderingen*, 22 March 1871, ff° 15–16; 10 January 1872, f° 20; 7 February 1872, f° 20 v°, 1, Archief NV Leidsche Volkskeuken (1870–1882), Erfgoed Leiden en Omstreken.

105 For a reader's letter on the matter, ironic as well as revealing, see: *Leydse Courant*, April 5, 1873, 3. For the dividends, see e.g.: *Reglement van de Naamloze Vennootschap De Leidsche Volkskeuken* (Leiden: Groen, 1870), 4; *Leidsch Dagblad*, April 2, 1878, 4; May 12, 1879, 3.

by a number of charitable organisations¹⁰⁶, but that did not suffice to keep the catering service running. Indeed, the charitable purchases never surpassed 6 per cent of the total business figures.¹⁰⁷ At the end of the decade, the managing board had to conclude that they were running a loss (it was observed for a first time in 1878) and eventually, in June 1881, a decision was made to close down the restaurant.¹⁰⁸

The lack of success must surely have been related to the price level of the processed food on offer: however much the organisers had tried to keep it as low as possible, even those modest sums per portion were still relatively high for the poor labourers of Leiden¹⁰⁹. The Coronel inquiry into the wages of the Leiden wool factory laborers some years before showed that the most modestly paid working men earned only 4.85 fl. a week, i.e. a daily budget of about 69 ct.: eating one portion of meat (15 ct.) and a portion of vegetables and potatoes (10 ct.) at noon immediately swallowed more than one third of that sum.¹¹⁰ In this respect, it is quite revealing that at the beginning of the week, when there was still something left of Saturday's wages, the *volkskaarkeuken* sold considerably more than at the end of the week, when money was running out: sales volumes then systematically dropped by about one third.¹¹¹ Necessarily, labourers with families, even when earning more than the quoted example, were usually not all that keen to use these catering services. It is therefore more than likely that

106 Notably the society *Uit Liefde*, a charitable society distributing food coupons to the poor, mainly in winter months, the *Elizabethvereniging*, that distributed food among the indigent sick and weak, and the *Vereeniging voor Behoeftige Kraamvrouwen*, helping poor women with newly born children. See: Notulen der bestuursvergaderingen, 31 August 1871, f° 18; October 1871, f° 19; 20 June 1881, s.f°, 1, Archief NV Leidsche Volkskeuken (1870–1881), Erfgoed Leiden en Omstreken; *Leydse Courant*, December 21, 1871, 3.

107 The percentage fluctuated between 4 per cent and 6 per cent: *Leydse Courant*, April 19, 1871, 2; December 21, 1871, 3.

108 Notulen der bestuursvergaderingen, 20 June 1881, s.f°, 1, Archief NV Leidsche Volkskeuken (1870–1881), Erfgoed Leiden en Omstreken; Notulen der Vergadering, 25 July 1881, 2, Archief NV Leidsche Volkskeuken (1870–1881), Erfgoed Leiden en Omstreken; *Leidsch Dagblad*, June 27, 1881, 3.

109 In a newspaper article promoting the start-up of the restaurant, Boogaard had shown himself to be well aware of the low wages in Leiden. See: *Leidsch Dagblad*, June 22, 1870, 2.

110 Quoted in: Annie Versprille, "Maatschappelijke zorg," in *Leiden 1860–1960*, eds. P.C.N. Baesjou e.a. (Leiden: Groen, 1962), 174. We compared it with the 1872 price list. See: Leidsche Volkskeuken. Tarief der Spijzen vanaf 1e April 1872, Folio Circulaires, LB 78041, Erfgoed Leiden en Omstreken.

111 See: *Leydse Courant*, December 20, 1871, 3; December 21, 1871, 3; Voorlopig verslag van het bestuur der Leidsche Volkskeuken (6 December 1871), p. 3, 1, Archief Vereeniging tot Verbetering van de Volksgezondheid te Leiden, Erfgoed Leiden en Omstreken.

the clientele came at least in part from other layers of society or, as can often be seen, was notably composed of bachelors. That raised its own kind of problems, because for this particular group, as one observer stated, the simple offer of processed food, however cheap and of good quality, was not all that attractive if it did not go along with an offer of lodging. Hence, the *volksgaarkeuken* found itself in rather unfavourable competition with the boarding houses of the city where both offers were combined. That proved to be decidedly more attractive to single men, even if the food was usually not better or was even worse. The result was that only a relatively limited amount of the bachelors in town effectively used the restaurant's services: contemporary observers did not fail to see this.¹¹² We did not find any traces of tied-in sales practices (the no-meals-purchased/no-lodgings-rented trick) as we did with the Charleroi case in Belgium, but it is nevertheless quite revealing that here again the boarding houses were able to push the people's restaurants aside, at least in smaller towns.

Durch das Fressen kommt die Moral?

All of this food reform very much presents itself, quite literally, as a mere bread-and-butter affair. In first instance it obviously was, whatever the motivation of the organising networks may have been: simply improving poor and monotonous working class diets, protecting public health at large by avoiding physical weakness in the lower classes, and, at least for some, helping to keep wages low by procuring cheap food. But it would be very reductive to only see this part of the matter. In both countries, the social reformers organising these *fourneaux économiques* or *volksgaarkeukens* also considered their institutions to be making a contribution to the global elevation of the proletariat, if only because it was impossible to improve oneself intellectually on an empty stomach. The initiators of e.g. the Charleroi *fourneaux économiques* were quite explicit about it: "One should not forget that material wellbeing engenders the moral good, and that all that tends to better the physical condition of the worker tends alike and as a way of consequence to elevate his moral and social condition".¹¹³ In this respect, putting an end to the price increases of food for the working man was the first issue to tackle. The initiators of the *Leidsche Volksgaarkeuken* were

¹¹² *Leidsch Dagblad*, November 27, 1876, 1.

¹¹³ *Gazette de Charleroi*, August 4, 1886, 3; October 4, 1888, 2. At the foundation meeting in Charleroi, food was identified as the first of the human needs, before clothing and housing. See: *Gazette de Charleroi*, August 10, 1886, 2.

just as explicit about that priority of good food before any attempt could be made at morally uplifting these people: “The numerous tentatives to raise the people intellectually and morally, however much we esteem them, all too often fail when healthy food lacks.” They concluded that, “before the brain, it is the body that must be fed”.¹¹⁴ But no matter whether adequate food was a priority, they did not omit integrating their food catering services in a broader perspective regarding the moral and intellectual elevation of the poor man.

This comes as no surprise. Social reformers did not usually limit their engagements to one particular charitable pastime, but integrated various engagements with a coherent view of society and the ways that the disruptions caused by modern capitalism had to be mended. If a panacea for ‘the social question’ had to be found, it was to be of a double nature, i.e. association and education. As we noticed when reconstructing a number of the restaurant’s foundation histories, the organisers of this social catering were often deeply implied in diverse pedagogical endeavours. For them, the people’s restaurants, as a matter of course, would have to be learning environments too. The learning content differed somewhat between the north and the south, the latter being keener on spreading the cooperative idea than the former, but for the rest things were quite comparable. That was certainly the case for the more comprehensive social objectives linked to all of these endeavours. In both cases, a fundamental shift had taken place with regard to the target group these modern forms of social catering were aiming at. By contrast to e.g. old style soup kitchens which were mainly directed towards the needy (only a small percentage of their products were sold to the non-assisted), the *fourneaux* wanted to sell meals to solvent labourers (hence it was now the donated portions that were at the margins of the system).¹¹⁵

As reflected in the words of Frederik N. Boer, the target of social catering should be caught under the concept of “decent poverty”, or “*fatsoenlijke armoede*” in Dutch.¹¹⁶ Clearly, this was not a concept aimed at paupers of any kind, but on the contrary at working class people with a regular income, however modest. Both groups decidedly carried a very different social potential. An interesting example of this new way of focusing on the labouring poor, and more or less dropping the paupers as the core of their concerns, can be found in the group of Freemasons that would create the first *fourneaux* in Ghent. They clearly opted out of focusing on the indigent, notably with regard to a social housing

¹¹⁴ *Leidsch Dagblad*, June 15, 1870, 1.

¹¹⁵ See a forthcoming article by Peter Scholliers and Jeffrey Tyssens in a book on food distribution in Belgium in the past and present.

¹¹⁶ Boer, *Een Woord voor het Volk*, 12.

project in the city, where they favoured property acquisition by the working class only, or even more specifically by those one could define as labour aristocracy:

If one wants to make serious advances in spreading progress among the popular classes, one must start to convene, not the most needy, but quite to the contrary those workers who have already distinguished themselves from the masses by their intelligence, their morality, their habits of order and thrift [...] that fraction of the popular class so worth of interest and sympathy who makes the transition from the proletariat to the bourgeoisie.¹¹⁷

The audience that was to find a kind of learning environment within these new restaurants was surely to be more encompassing than merely this elite group, but still it was definitely only labourers and not the needy that could acquire moral and organisational skills in these institutions:

[H]ere we have an occasion to teach to our labourers the mechanisms of cooperative societies, by means of an example that is rich in its results and easy to appreciate. They will see there what thrift can do for the benefit of families. They will get convinced that it is essential for them to take care of their own interests, and they will appreciate more than today how urgent it is for them to acquire the instruction without which it will be impossible for them, not only to run their own business, but even to understand why it is useful for them.¹¹⁸

Indeed for paupers, with no proper income available, such a program would simply be inconceivable. In a similar vein, the Brussels organisers considered their experiment to be a learning experience as such, where the lodges were to make the first step and then, by means of the practical example that had been set, the working classes could learn to deal with the principle of cooperative association.¹¹⁹ External observers also stressed just this: a mere charity would be morally undermining, it was even rejected as an “*élément perturbateur*”, i.e. a nuisance, but the sustained experience of the cooperative formula would permanently develop the “moral and intellectual faculties of its participants”.¹²⁰ If in the Netherlands this cooperative objective was as good as absent, the reasoning was not all that different in the end. Here as well, notably in the words of the Leiden team, the modern *volksgaarkeuken* would appeal to a “sane sense of honour” of the “independent working man”, precisely because

117 *La Flandre*, September 10, 1869, 2.

118 *La Flandre*, September 10, 1869, 2; René Vermeir & Jeffrey Tyssens, *Vrijmetselarij en vooruitgang. De Gentse progressistenloge La Liberté (1866–1966)* (Brussels: ASP, 2016), 148.

119 *Société coopérative alimentaire Les Atelier Réunis. Première assemblée générale. Séance du 17 janvier 1869* (Brussels: Bols-Wittouck, 1869), 7.

120 *L'Économiste Belge*, April 4, 1868, 77

the charitable approach was not taken.¹²¹ It was quite revealing to what extent the Dutch press could be explicit about the fundamental difference between the new *volkskaarkeuken* and the old-style *soepinrichtingen* or ‘soup kitchens’: the former were meant for labourers who wanted to acquire good and affordable food for cash, whereas the latter catered for the indigent who obtained its services for free, with all the moral considerations that were to be added to that fundamental distinction.¹²²

But the distinction was not always that clear. Sometimes practices of the old soup kitchens were continued alongside the more modern ‘food-for-cash’-approach. In Leiden, for example, food tickets for the *volkskaarkeuken* were put on sale in the city’s bookshops, allowing the well-to-do to purchase them and hand them to the indigent of their choice.¹²³ In Charleroi, about 15 years later, the local liberals also had a vision that put the catering facility in a kind of symbiotic relation with existing charities, rather than acting as a competitor or a full-fledged alternative to it:

[T]his economical institution can strongly help charity, but it is not exclusively charitable. Not everybody accepts alms, and among those who are hungry some prefer suffering to tending their hand. It is precisely to handle this legitimate susceptibility that one has thought to alleviate misery without imposing shame, as one only accepts an obol reduced to the strict minimum. This will not stop those who want to do charity to the poor who do not possess that obol, to cover their charity in the forms of tickets to consume at the establishment.¹²⁴

In any case, the format was presumed to avoid any diminishment of the beneficiary’s dignity and to have a permanent effect comparable with a rise in wages.¹²⁵ The pedagogical features of the *fourneaux économiques* themselves had already been stressed in the Grenoble restaurant which had proved so much of an inspiration. Indeed, Taulier’s book, which was some kind of a manual for the Brussels initiative, was very explicit on the matter. For Taulier, “the alimentary association [was] a school of decency, of discipline, of respect by all for all, by everyone for him/herself.” Taulier stressed the good order and calm reigning at the ticket selling counter and in the dining rooms and pointed at a kind of mutual education of decent behaviour, with table manners and the like, that grew almost

¹²¹ *Leidsch Dagblad*, June 15, 1870, 1.

¹²² *Arnheemsche Courant*, August 3, 1870, 3.

¹²³ Notulen der bestuursvergaderingen, 31 August 1871, f° 19, 1, Archief NV Leidsche Volkskeuken (1870–1881), Erfgoed Leiden en Omstreken.

¹²⁴ *Gazette de Charleroi*, August 9, 1886, 2.

¹²⁵ *Gazette de Charleroi*, August 8, 1886, 1.

spontaneously from the everyday functioning of the restaurants: “How much a man is elevated in his own eyes by this exchange of conveniences which he himself practices and of which he is the object”.¹²⁶ Something similar was stated by Léon d’Andrimont, who had observed the earliest Belgian restaurants for the book on working class institutions quoted previously:

Through the contact with a neighbour who sometimes is better educated than oneself, one cares to imitate him; a point of honour is at stake and one takes care to arrive gradually at a better demeanour. It would be most daring if one were to permit oneself to hurt one’s neighbour’s feelings by inconvenient words or gestures! The view of this large dining hall at the time of the main meal is really surprising: one would think oneself in a good bourgeois home.¹²⁷

The moral properties of the day-to-day functioning of the *fourneaux* were obviously echoed in the rules of conduct. In Grenoble, one of the striking features was the presence of a strictly separated dining room for women or families.¹²⁸ Such a gender line was not to be found in the by-laws of the Belgian and Dutch examples, but it does however seem that not much of a female clientele was expected in the dining facilities: interestingly, when women were mentioned, it was usually when referring to the take-away options.¹²⁹ These were usually presented as proof that these social catering facilities were not a threat to family cohesion.¹³⁰ Whether or not that was the case, the dining halls all established strict guidelines for behaviour, limiting drinking, sometimes also prohibiting smoking or loud conversation.¹³¹ Even the decoration of the dining rooms could support moralising and instructional aims. In Brussels, the 1868 facility of the *Atelier Réunis* had been furnished by François Wilbrandt (1824–1873), the well-known Brussels opera decorator, with that specific goal: one wall was covered with “maxims of family morals”; a second one with scenes from Belgian history; a third one with images of caring for domestic animals.¹³²

126 Taulier, *Le vrai livre du peuple*, 249.

127 d’Andrimont, *Des institutions et des associations ouvrières*, 301.

128 Taulier, *Le vrai livre du peuple*, 247.

129 *Provinciale Drentsche en Asser Courant*, October 6, 1871, 2.

130 A Charleroi newspaper stated it as follows: “the institution of the economical kitchens has the simple goal of helping the working man and not to draw him out of his house and destroy the spirit of the family”. See: *Gazette de Charleroi*, August 10, 1886, 2.

131 *Société coopérative alimentaire Les Atelier Réunis. Première assemblée générale*, 10, 24–25; Uittreksel uit het Huishoudelijk Reglement voor de Volksgaarkeuken te Groningen, 157, Archief Nederlandsche Maatschappij voor Nijverheid en Handel – Departement Deventer, Historisch Centrum Overijssel, Deventer, the Netherlands.

132 *Société coopérative alimentaire Les Atelier Réunis. Première assemblée générale*, 10.

On top of this, as we have already suggested, these social catering facilities operated in networks with educational institutions. In Amsterdam, the *Nut*-related people's restaurant served as a place to register for the evening courses the society offered.¹³³ Boer's first restaurant in Rotterdam had even attached a reading room to its dining facility. It offered several dailies (notably the liberal *Het Vaderland* and the *Rotterdamsche Courant*), as well as some periodicals and books.¹³⁴

Interestingly, these social reformers were not only focused on what their form of social catering could teach the working classes, but also on the educational value of the kitchens' products themselves. One of the organisers of the *fourneaux économiques* in Ghent in the early 1890s, Georges Waelbroeck (1851–1917), a liberal attorney who served as the secretary of the city's hospices, was quite explicit about this point: "First of all, we ought to take care of his [the working man's] 'culinary education': the poor do not know how to eat".¹³⁵ It was a motive one could observe in several of our cases. Already with the first restaurant in Rotterdam, Boer remarked that his first clients were creatures of habit and stated that he tried to make their diets more diverse: "At first there was a strong drive towards eating potatoes and stew. Gradually then, by means of short comments and some reasoning, I succeeded to have much more pea soup consumed, haricots, rice soup and buttermilk porridge, than potatoes".¹³⁶ In Leiden too, the organisers considered the people's kitchen to be an experimental way of getting the working man "acquainted with healthy and sufficient food".¹³⁷ Just as Boer had done for Rotterdam, the Leiden organisers made some observations regarding the non-familiarity of their customers with particular soups, especially pea and bean soups, both of them being made with at least some meat and hence being a problem for the average working class family budget.¹³⁸ Interestingly, the gradual development of sound food habits among the labourers would eventually lead them to satisfy their own and their family's real needs "with abandonment of useless expenditures".¹³⁹ Even if it was not always explained what these superfluous expenses actually were, everybody must have known that hard liquor was inferred. Indeed, on other occasions, the food

133 *Algemeen Handelsblad*, September 29, 1871, 4.

134 Boer, *Een Woord voor het Volk*, 13.

135 *Société Libérale pour l'Étude des Sciences et des Œuvres Sociales – Bulletin n° 16*, 1892, 40.

136 Boer, *Een Woord voor het Volk*, 5.

137 *Leidsch Dagblad*, June 15, 1870, 1.

138 *Leydse Courant*, April 18, 1871, 2. Little had changed about 20 years later. See: Margreet van Es, "Etenstijds! Voedselconsumptie onder Leidse arbeidersrond 1890," *Jaarboek der Sociale en Economische Geschiedenis van Leiden en omstreken* 19–20 (2007–2008): 127–155.

139 *Leidsch Dagblad*, June 15, 1870, 1.

culture of the *fourneaux économiques* was explicitly presented as an alternative for the drinking joints where labourers were said to end up through lack of decent food. The *volksgaarkeukens* were even presented as more useful than the “*afschaffings-genootschappen*”, i.e. the ‘tee total’ societies.¹⁴⁰

Conclusion

Food had been an important component of traditional forms of charity. Feeding the indigent functioned by donating food, usually on an occasional or a seasonal basis. These donations were unrelated to the identification of a ‘social question’, nor to any social and economic analysis that could lead to a hypothetical solution of the latter. This was clearly not the perspective behind the modern *fourneaux économiques*, where the initiators wanted to offer more structural ways of dealing with food insufficiency, not for the indigent however but for solvent workers. Their philanthropic ventures were usually related to at least some kind of analysis of the ills of capitalist society, whether from a social or a hygienic point of view, for which structural and continuous provision of cheap food had to be part of any solution. Incentives for the labouring classes to opt for self-help formulas were seen as effective gateways towards a de-proletarianisation of the latter, a perspective that was absent for the indigent. This fitted well with the citizenship model of “productive virtue”¹⁴¹, where productive labourers could be integrated in large, socially useful middling orders, but not the idle and unproductive underclass. For them, traditional charity still had to do. But that was not the core business of the new-style catering facilities we have studied here.

The groups of social reformers in the Low Countries that focused on changing and ameliorating the eating habits of the working man were usually liberal in outlook, but not exclusively, at least not in the north. By contrast to the south, where the liberal left wing of the *progressistes* dominated the scene, the contribution of northern social liberalism was weaker as well. This surely explains a lot of the differences with regard to the cooperative option: this was *the* big objective in the south, even if it only succeeded marginally to materialise, whereas the *volksgaarkeukens* in the north simply restricted it to the form of the *Naamloze*

¹⁴⁰ *Provinciale Drentsche en Asser Courant*, October 6, 1871, 2.

¹⁴¹ Siep Stuurman, “Le libéralisme comme invention historique,” *Les libéralismes, la théorie politique et l’histoire*, ed. Siep Stuurman (Amsterdam: University Press, 1994), 28; S. Stuurman, *Wacht op onze daden. Het liberalisme en de vernieuwing van de Nederlandse staat* (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 1992), 370–371.

Genootschap, i.e. ordinary stock companies with shares bought by the better-off. This echoes more global observations of the somewhat reduced popularity of co-operative ideals in the north as compared to the south.¹⁴² But this difference should not be overstated though. In the north as well as in the south, perspectives were very much comparable with regard to the uplifting potential of these low price dining halls or their take-away services: no moral or intellectual development of the labourers would be possible if they were not decently fed and furthermore an educational added value was to be expected from the catering activity in itself. Indeed, better eating habits and perhaps even better table manners and the like might be expected to spread by dint of its day-to-day activities.

Whether this actually worked out as planned, is another matter altogether. Globally, one might say that the image is rather ambivalent. Some of these ventures lasted for quite some time and could at least develop some outreach, but as far as limited sources permit any conclusions, it does seem that the original target group was only partly reached. Often, the price reductions the popular restaurants could realise through the scale of their food processing did not seem really sufficient to cater for low salaries. Hence, for working men with a family burden, certainly when they belonged to labouring subgroups with lower wages, social catering facilities remained relatively expensive. Consequently, in as far as the restaurants attracted a working class clientele, it must largely have been bachelors. But as we have seen, in the north as well as in the south, this could be a serious liability for these low price dining halls: in at least one of the cases we studied, the boarding house sector could get the upper hand and eventually wreck these new competing caterers. What then made for the sustainability of some of the others that lasted for several decades? They usually operated in larger cities, like Brussels or Amsterdam, where competition functioned in a very different configuration: there were larger potential groups of consumers, more qualified workers with better wages and, perhaps even more importantly, lower middle class groups, such as employees of all kinds or minor civil servants, who could also be attracted by the daily offer of cheap meals.¹⁴³ At least in the Brussels case, it also appears that, on top of this other composition of the clientele, systematic meal purchases by local authorities (for their schools, for instance) helped to guarantee sufficient sales figures in the long run.

142 Stefan Dudink, *Deugdzaam liberalisme. Sociaal-liberalisme in Nederland 1870–1901* (Amsterdam: Stichting IISG, 1997), 90–96.

143 In one of the rare evaluations of the clientele, Boer noticed that in Rotterdam this was precisely what happened. See: Boer, *Een Woord voor het Volk*, 9.

Despite this, some questions can be raised about the realities of the moral uplift or the educational potential of these ventures, however explicitly and ambitiously the social reformers had attached these to their institutions. It seems quite likely that the implementation of the moral uplift schemes within the dining halls was largely a matter of wishful thinking or would prove to be, when other parts of their audience are looked at, a self-fulfilling prophecy. Obviously, it is near impossible to measure the instructional impact of these low price dining halls upon their customers. Even if the latter belonged to the working classes, ate their soups without slurping or making any noisy conversation between walls covered with all sorts of wisdom and edifying history lessons, that did not imply that they were gradually becoming the *petit bourgeois* many social reformers had in mind. On the other hand, it is quite likely that more than just a small part of the customers already belonged to petty bourgeois groups, who were long since supposed to carry with them the *habitus* these *volksgaardekens* and *fourneaux économiques* were supposed to foster.