Fear and fascination towards Savages in the Slums and the Colonies

In the presentation of western social and urban problems around 1900, the working class was regularly depicted as the ‘exotic other’. Literary, political and scientific writers often compared the workers with ‘wilde’, ‘demons’, ‘aborigines’, ‘beasts’: in general, as uncivilized savages. Their neighbourhoods, as mysterious as ‘Timbuctoo’ or ‘the African bush’, were described as unknown land that had to be explored. Fascinated by this terra incognita, many members of the higher middle class went slumming to observe these poor, exotic ‘others’.

Either out of sensation or indignation, these writers-explorers felt a moral obligation, based upon the idea of a Christian or humanitarian duty, to transform these uncivilized workers into a civilized group of co-citizens. Within the descriptions and definitions of the problems of these ‘others’, emotions played a central part: fear and sensation, empathy and disgust, curiosity and arousal triggered the men and women to explore this unknown world, to proclaim their findings and to develop solutions.

At first sight, the links of this slumming with the so-called White man’s burden towards the inhabitants of the colonies are striking. Leading question in this paper is if this comparison is justified. Were the emotions that lead both groups of explorers indeed similar? And can the moral base on which the working class and the indigenous ‘other’ was defined be labelled as identical?

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Biographical note

Dr. Christianne Smit (1968) is Lecturer and Senior Researcher at the Department of Political History at Utrecht University. She received her Ph.D. at the University of Amsterdam in 2002 with a study on the struggle for the implementation of a Dutch income tax in the 19th century (Omwille der billijkheid. De strijd over de invoering van de inkomstenbelasting in Nederland). She is co-editor of the international volumes In Control of the City. Local Elites and the Dynamics of Urban Politics, 1800-1960 (Leuven 2007) and Imagination and Commitment. Representations of the Social Question (Leuven 2010). In 2008 she edited a volume in Dutch on Decent Recreation: Respectable relaxation for workers after 1870 (Fatsoenlijk vertier. Deugdzame ontspanning voor arbeiders na 1870, Amsterdam 2008). During Spring Term 2013 she has been visiting lecturer at the University of California in Los Angeles. Her current research deals with social reformers in the Netherlands between 1870 and 1914, their inspirations, practical initiatives, and international networks. A monograph on these social reformers will be published in 2014. Subsequently, her research will focus on Western responses towards colonial violence around 1900, the moral concepts and the transnational networks of these imperial critics.