

# Kuyper's Earliest Essay on the "Social Question"

## Introduction

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It has regularly been assumed that Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920) was late in paying attention to the impoverishment of the working class in his time. His famous speech at the Social Congress of 1891, which he himself had convened, is then regarded as his main contribution, and is said to have been motivated in part by electoral considerations.<sup>1</sup>

In this context it is good to realize that the Industrial Revolution did not get underway in the Netherlands until 1860, a century later than in Scotland and half a century after Belgium. However, the Netherlands, like large parts of Europe, was also badly affected by famines partly caused by potato blight in the years 1845–1847. In Ireland, out of a population of 8.3 million, starvation killed more than a million people; in the much smaller Netherlands, about 60,000 out of a population of just under 3 million.<sup>2</sup> Kuyper's mentor Groen van Prinsterer wrote in the revolutionary year of 1848: "Our worst social ailment is pauperism. Poverty, unemployment; ruptured relations between the higher and lower classes; no bond save wages and labor; proletarians and capitalists."<sup>3</sup>

As for Kuyper: *On Business & Economics* (2021), volume 11 in the Lexham Collected Works in Public Theology series, shows a very different story.<sup>4</sup> The volume contains some twenty essays and articles, almost all of which are about labor and the "social question," rather than business. It contains Kuyper's 1891 speech, "The Social Question and the Christian Religion," as well as a surprising number of other essays and speeches.

Yet one essay that could have shed light on the development of Kuyper's thought in the earliest phase of his public appearance is missing. In the volume,

Kuyper's brief introduction to an 1871 Dutch translation of an anonymous German pamphlet on "Working People and the Church"—probably by the bishop of Mainz, Wilhelm von Ketteler (1811–1877), who is widely credited as the father of Catholic social teaching—is held up as “[o]ne of Kuyper’s first.”<sup>5</sup> Peter Heslam, the volume editor, notes that in 1871 Kuyper was still “a long way off” from the standpoint of his 1891 speech, with his “architectural critique” of capitalist society. That assessment might have turned out somewhat differently had the volume included an essay from 1870, i.e., a year earlier and considerably more robust in scope.

The full text of this early essay, which has so far been overlooked, follows this introduction. Its omission is not surprising. It is an article from the first appearance of the weekly *De Heraut*. This earlier weekly—not to be confused with the Sunday paper of the same name that Kuyper would lead from 1878 until his death—has been little read in Kuyper research. The contributions, including those by Kuyper himself, from October 1870 unofficially and from January 1871 officially as editor-in-chief, are usually anonymous.

The same is true of this essay, “The Factory Workers,” which, however, can be attributed with certainty to Kuyper himself. It shows that even in 1870, Kuyper already held radical views on the social question, as one of the few Dutchmen of his time. Unlike in his 1871 introduction, Kuyper does suggest “architectural” solutions here through a “Hercules” who would have to cleanse the Augias stable. In any case, he describes a concrete approach—self-organization with active support from the church—that should lead directly to improved living conditions. Throughout his life, Kuyper would be a staunch supporter of labor unions: labor needed to organize to form a countervailing force against capital; the state would never be able to play that role.

Against what background can we place these views? To begin with, it is possible to draw a picture of what Kuyper himself observed of impoverishment among workers. Although raised in a petty bourgeois family and a student in Leiden, he came into full contact with poverty as a pastor. In his first congregation in Beesd (1863–1867), he was known for visiting all congregation members at home, including poor farm workers—the majority of the population. In Beesd, he would take a revolutionary step, about which more in a moment. But especially as pastor in Amsterdam (1870–1874), he faced plenty of poverty and pauperization among working-class families.

As historian Jasper Vree has meticulously researched and described, Kuyper was assigned the poorest neighborhoods of Amsterdam and actively made house calls to all those families.<sup>6</sup> Certainly in Amsterdam his eyes must have been opened to the magnitude and urgency of the social question. And undoubtedly

also in the poor neighborhoods of Brussels and other European cities. From at least 1867, he visited both London and Paris annually.<sup>7</sup> Lifelong, he was an avid city walker, especially in what were at that time the two largest metropolises. He would later do the same in New York and Chicago.

During his stay in America in 1898, he would write that pauperism in American cities was less hopeless than in the European cities he had visited. Those who had experienced the "deep misery of pauperism in the slums of London and Paris, of Berlin and Vienna, of Amsterdam and Brussels, in all its bitterness and demoralizing tenor"—like himself, Kuyper means; he always took his images from life—could breathe a sigh of relief in America. Kuyper had witnessed, in his own words, the "curse of pauperism" firsthand.<sup>8</sup> In *Down and Out in Paris and London*, George Orwell in 1933 would describe the underside of society in these world cities. Kuyper was already experiencing it around 1870.

Moreover, in the meantime, a public debate on the social question had also arisen in the Netherlands. A major instigator was Jacob Jan Cremer's 1863 novella, "Factory Children," about the degrading working conditions in a textiles factory in Leiden of children as young as ten years old.<sup>9</sup> It played a role similar to that of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*—Kuyper knew that novel, too—in the American slavery debate.<sup>10</sup> Cremer originally delivered it as a lecture and even after its publication he toured the country with it. The subtitle read, "A plea, though not for money." It called for political intervention, and even the incumbent prime minister, Thorbecke, showed himself affected and met with Cremer in a personal audience.<sup>11</sup> The subject dominated the news for years, and Kuyper undoubtedly got it.

The other question, then, is on what he based his social ideas. Much attention has rightly been paid to Kuyper's conversion in the religious sense. His religious conversion had far-reaching consequences and determined his life; its radical significance cannot be doubted. At the same time, as I argue elsewhere, his political conversion has remained underexposed in the process.<sup>12</sup>

For this we also have far fewer sources. According to Kuyper's own account, much later, it took place in the autumn of 1866, when he was still a village pastor in Beesd.<sup>13</sup> For himself, it was a direct result of his church conversion. The political conservative, ardently royalist and equally ardently anti-papist, as his whole social background informed him and formed a general pattern among Dutch Reformed ministers of his generation, had to reinvent himself.

We can see a first sign of political conversion in his radical reform of church regulations in Beesd. In 1867 the local church council there decided, at Kuyper's suggestion, that both the pastor and the church council would henceforth be elected by the members—i.e., by ordinary villagers, mostly poor women and

men, more than half a century before they would also have the right to vote for the national parliament. It put him on a collision course with Count Van Bylandt, for decades practically the autocrat in both village and church—who, *nota bene*, had appointed Kuyper himself.<sup>14</sup>

Soon Kuyper's new democratic disposition could no longer be doubted. Meanwhile, he corresponded with Groen van Prinsterer, who introduced him to antirevolutionary circles, a new world for him. Also since he was the political editor of the weekly *De Heraut*, Kuyper read all the antirevolutionary sources that were presented to him. "It does not occur to me that we do not have our own political story, distinct from other movements," he wrote, still searching, to Groen.<sup>15</sup>

Yet by about 1870, his political vision lay already quite crystallized before him. His correspondence with Groen van Prinsterer does include some titles that helped him on his quest. The Irish Protestant Edmund Burke, though clearly more conservative politically, played a crucial role in Kuyper's discovery of Calvinism as a driving force in the English-speaking world.<sup>16</sup> But his sources regarding the social question remain guesswork.

After Kuyper's death, his daughter Henriëtte made a global inventory of his library, but a true title list of his book holdings was never compiled, even in the half century that his books were kept in the "Kuyperhuis," as his home came to be called after his death, when it served as the office of the Anti-Revolutionary Party (ARP).<sup>17</sup> Sometimes his sources can be traced from the notes of his main publications, as Joost Hengstmengel did exemplarily a few years ago with Kuyper's underpinnings of his economic ideas.<sup>18</sup> For example, he appears to have taken note of both the first and second editions of Karl Marx's *Capital*. But most of his articles for his weekly and daily newspaper lacked the time and space for such an account, except for the occasional quick note.

So we still wait for a thorough archival and source study of the early "political" Kuyper, such as Jasper Vree undertook twenty years ago for the ecclesiastical one—a breakthrough in Kuyper research.<sup>19</sup> One preliminary conclusion can already be drawn. Biographer James Bratt once noted with some surprise that Kuyper apparently drew no particular lessons from his burnout of 1876–1877, when he was out for nearly a year and a half, living with his family in Switzerland, Nice, and Italy.<sup>20</sup> But in his speech to his party in 1885, years later that is, he did offer a glimpse of what had been going around in his soul and to what iron resolutions it led.

In his speech, held in The Hague, he shared more personal information than usual.<sup>21</sup> He related how he had discovered Reformed orthodoxy but had long remained unsure about what it all stood for. He had no certainty until his illness

in 1876, when on the Simplon Pass in Switzerland, he had a nighttime vision of Groen's ascension into heaven. Only after that, when he had gone to Nice, did he have a third kind of conversion, he now unveiled, one of a more political nature.

This speech to the deputies is therefore important for his life story. In his silent suffering in Nice, his soul was "converted to the resoluteness of the firm and uncompromising religion of our fathers." He had returned to the fatherland with a sharper understanding of the principles for which he had fought. "My first cry therefore was: Quit government circles and concentrate on the people!"<sup>22</sup>

This outpouring of his soul is important because it displays a recurring pattern in the evolution of Kuyper's life and career. He had earlier described his religious conversion in similar terms. Later he would call it "the power of the absolute," an immovable conviction that thrust itself upon him more urgently after every crisis.<sup>23</sup> In short, every low point in his life heralded a new phase in which he pursued his goals with still more inexorable determination.

The basic pattern had already fairly crystallized around 1870, the result of his religious conversion in 1866 and the stakes of his first public appearances in 1867. That he could bring it all together under the one rubric of "Calvinism" would not dawn on him until 1873. But even before that, it led to an indissoluble unity of his religious, social, and political beliefs. The Reformed confession and his political program—"equal justice for all," democracy, the fight for the church, the school struggle, and the social question—were henceforth inseparable for Kuyper.<sup>24</sup>

He would not deviate from that line for the rest of his life. Precisely the social question would also remain a spearhead of his own political agenda, however difficult it was for his fellow antirevolutionaries to follow him in this at times. The issue was at the forefront of Kuyper's mind from his first to his last political appearances, not only from 1891 onward.

Not coincidentally, Kuyper devoted his first long article series in his new daily *De Standaard* to the social question. It began two weeks after the first issue of April 1, 1872, and continued for the rest of April and May. The eleven-part series actually bore that title: "The Social Question."<sup>25</sup> Again, this series should not have been missing from the *On Business & Economics* anthology. Indeed, in it, Kuyper is not only already practicing "architectural criticism," but also offering political solutions, decades before such legislation was actually being worked on in the Netherlands. Concrete measures he mentions include: wage increases, reduced working hours, a legal ban on labor for married women and child labor, and building programs of good workers' housing at every major factory.<sup>26</sup>

It could not fail to happen: when he became the second youngest member of the House of Representatives in 1874, two years later, he immediately put the social question high on his political agenda. Of the 29 contributions he made

to parliamentary debates in his two years as an MP, eight dealt with the social question: less than his ten speeches on the colonial question—the war on Sumatra against the Sultan of Aceh had just begun, his brother Herman was killed there in April—but more than all the other topics, including five on the school struggle, obviously the main battleground for antirevolutionaries.<sup>27</sup>

Because his speeches were clearly delivered in the context of an ongoing debate and responded to specific proposals, they are less fundamental in character than his essays and therefore not included in *On Business & Economics* either. For the same reason, they are undoubtedly—as are the other essays described here—missing from a Dutch precursor to this anthology, the 1956 collection under the title, in translation: “Architectonic Criticism: Fragments from the Socio-Political Writings of Dr. A. Kuyper” by W. F. de Gaay Fortman (1911–1997), an antirevolutionary party colleague, later rector of the Free University Amsterdam and Minister of the Interior.<sup>28</sup> At the same time, precisely in his first parliamentary skirmishes, more than anywhere else, Kuyper was able to give free rein to his architectural criticism and ideas about political solutions.

From the beginning to the end of his public appearance, the social question touched more than one nerve with Kuyper. The passion with which he stood up for the pauperized working class set him apart from almost all his political contemporaries. For Kuyper, there was clearly more at stake than a political program: the social needs of his time touched his soul. It literally permeated his entire work.

Twenty years ago this was already substantiated in this journal. In his article on Kuyper’s position on the social question, Kuyper biographer James Bratt argued as much: “Kuyper’s passion for the poor was persistent, not just at the 1891 Christian Social Congress but long before it and long after it; nor just in his pronouncements on social ethics but also in his politics, his history, his biblical commentary, his ecclesiology, his school and university reforms: Everywhere the poor appeared, everywhere their oppression rankled, and everywhere Kuyper put God squarely on their side.”<sup>29</sup>

Not without significance, Kuyper also devoted his political will to the social question. His last speech as party leader—*What Next?*, May 1918—was entirely in this vein.<sup>30</sup> At the end of World War I, he noted that the school struggle had been won and universal suffrage realized. All the more his fellow antirevolutionaries should now put all their cards on the solution of the social question.

This early essay from 1870, half a century earlier, is evidence of his ideas and sentiments well before his first political appearances. But even in 1870, he was not alone. The miserable conditions in three cotton and tobacco factories

in the Utrecht village of Veenendaal, which are his impetus, had been described in a pamphlet by the local pastor, Philippus Jacobus Hoedemaker (1839–1910).

After the Doleantie, Hoedemaker would become one of Kuyper's main opponents, but in the 1870s he developed into one of Kuyper's main supporters. At *De Standaard* and later at the weekly *De Heraut*, Hoedemaker was also his co-editor. It is not inconceivable that his standing up for the factory workers in Veenendaal drew Kuyper's attention to him—in any case, their rapprochement took place around this time. It is Hoedemaker's account of his work among these factory workers that Kuyper discusses here in the weekly *De Heraut*.<sup>31</sup>

For his part, Hoedemaker would later write that he had already met Kuyper as a pastor in Utrecht—i.e., before August 1870—and that he “enjoyed his company,” although the latter may indicate a later date.<sup>32</sup> In his essay, however, Kuyper does not mention Hoedemaker's name, nor does he give evidence of knowing him.

Note incidentally the lapidary opening sentence, a trademark of Kuyper by this time. Note also the visionary closing paragraphs, in which his ideas take flight. Kuyper often worked toward such a climax in his writing—it was sometimes literally a vision he was chasing. It would never let him go.

## Notes

1. See Abraham Kuyper, “The Social Question and the Christian Religion,” in *On Business & Economics*, ed. Peter S. Heslam, Abraham Kuyper Collected Works in Public Theology (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2021), 11:169–229. Biographer Jeroen Koch hardly mentions this congress or even this speech: Jeroen Koch, *Abraham Kuyper, een biografie* (Amsterdam: Boom, 2006; 2020). In his superb 2013 biography, however, James Bratt observes with compelling evidence that by 1891 Kuyper had already “shown a persistent concern for labor issues for three decades of his public life,” starting as early as the village pastor in Beesd. See James D. Bratt, *Abraham Kuyper: Modern Calvinist, Christian Democrat* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013), 223.
2. Christopher Clark, *Revolutionary Spring: Europe Aflame and the Fight for a New World, 1848–1849* (New York: Crown, 2023), 62.
3. Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer, *Vrijheid, Gelijkheid, Broederschap. Toelichting van de spreuk der revolutie* (The Hague: J. Roering, 1848), 83.
4. See Heslam, ed., *On Business & Economics*.
5. Heslam, ed., *On Business & Economics*, 125.
6. Jasper Vree, *Kuyper in de kiem. De precalvinistische periode van Abraham Kuyper, 1848–1874* (Hilversum, NL: Uitgeverij Verloren, 2006), 332–34.

7. Abraham Kuyper, *Antirevolutionaire staatkunde met nadere toelichting op ons program. Tweede deel. De toepassing* (Kampen, NL: J. H. Kok, 1917), 52–54 (§36: *Ommeker in Engeland*).
8. Abraham Kuyper, *Varia Americana* (Amsterdam: Höveker & Wormser, 1899), 2.
9. J. J. Cremer, *Fabriekskinderen: Een bede, doch niet om geld* (Arnhem, NL: Thieme, 1863).
10. Kuyper about Harriet Beecher Stowe: Abraham Kuyper, “Boekaankondiging,” *De Heraut* (November 12, 1869).
11. Thomas Heerma van Voss, “Voor grote veranderingen zijn grote gebaren nodig, en Fabriekskinderen was een groot gebaar,” Literatuur Museum, January 12, 2023, [www.literatuurmuseum.nl](http://www.literatuurmuseum.nl).
12. See Johan Snel, *The Seven Lives of Abraham Kuyper: Portrait of an Enigmatic Dutchman* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2024).
13. Speech from April 1897, in Abraham Kuyper, “Celebrating Twenty-Five Years of *De Standaard*,” in *On Charity & Justice*, ed. Matthew J. Tuininga et al., Abraham Kuyper Collected Works in Public Theology (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2022), 12:240–41.
14. Vree, *Kuyper in de kiem*, 156–59.
15. Letter by Kuyper to Groen van Prinsterer of March 7, 1873 in *Briefwisseling van Mr. G. Groen van Prinsterer met Dr. A. Kuyper 1864–1876*, ed. A. Goslinga (Kampen, NL: J. H. Kok, 1937), 217–18.
16. For Burke, see Abraham Kuyper, *Calvinism: Source and Stronghold of Our Constitutional Liberties* (1874), in *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, ed. James D. Bratt (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 279–322.
17. See Henriëtte Kuyper’s inventory in Kuyper Archive 366, online with the Neo-Calvinism Research Institute (NRI).
18. Joost Hengstmengel, “The Amateur Economist: Abraham Kuyper and Economics,” *Journal of Economics, Theology and Religion* 1, no. 2 (2021): 137–58.
19. See Vree, *Kuyper in de kiem*. Hopefully PhD researcher Matthijs van der Stoep, working on a study of “the red Kuyper,” namely Kuyper’s relationship with socialism, will shed more light on this.
20. See James Bratt, “Raging tumults of soul: the private life of Abraham Kuyper,” in *On Kuyper: A Collection of Readings on the Life, Work & Legacy of Abraham Kuyper*, eds. Steve Bishop and John H. Kok (Sioux Center, IA: Dordt Press, 2013), 33–38.

21. See speech of 1885 in Abraham Kuyper, *Geen vergeefs woord. Verzamelde Deputaten-redevoeringen* (Kampen, NL: J. H. Kok, 1951), 20–28.
22. Kuyper, *Geen vergeefs woord*, 24.
23. Asterism about the power of the absolute: Abraham Kuyper, "Pietje Baltus," *De Standaard*, March 30, 1914.
24. "GELIJK RECHT VOOR ALLEN," EQUAL JUSTICE FOR ALL, in among other places: Abraham Kuyper, "Een kranke staat," *De Heraut* (November 18, 1870) and Abraham Kuyper, "Van wanneer dagteekent onze nationaliteit?," *De Heraut* (July 28, 1871). In 1879, socialist and anarchist leader Ferdinand Domela Nieuwenhuis, who was known to read Kuyper, christened his newspaper "Recht voor Allen," Justice for All.
25. Abraham Kuyper, "De sociale kwestie I–XI," *De Standaard*, April 16, 17, 18, 20, 25, 29, May 2, 4, 9/10, 15, 23, 1872.
26. Abraham Kuyper, "De sociale kwestie XI," *De Standaard*, May 23, 1872.
27. Abraham Kuyper, *Eenige Kameradviezen uit de jaren 1874 en 1875* (Amsterdam: J. A. Wormser, 1890).
28. Originally: W. F. de Gaay Fortman, ed., *Architectonische critiek. Fragmenten uit de sociaal-politieke geschriften van Dr. A. Kuyper* (Amsterdam: H. J. Paris, 1956).
29. James Bratt, "Passionate About the Poor: The Social Attitudes of Abraham Kuyper," *Journal of Markets & Morality* 5, no. 1 (Spring 2002) 35–44.
30. See Abraham Kuyper, "What Next?," in *On Business & Economics*, 343–49.
31. See Ph. J. Hoedemaker, *De Werkzaamheden onder de Fabrieksarbeiders te Veenendaal. Overgedrukt uit "Goud uit Schuim"* (Amsterdam: Höveker, 1870). A new, different edition was published five years later as Ph. J. Hoedemaker, *De Fabrieks-Arbeiders te Veenendaal* (Amsterdam: Höveker, 1875).
32. G. Ph. Scheers, *Philippus Jacobus Hoedemaker* (Wageningen, NL: H. Veenman & Zonen, 1939; Leiden: J. J. Groen en Zoon, 1989), 35.