

Cambridge University Press

0521367859 - Plain Lives in a Golden Age: Popular Culture, Religion and Society in Seventeenth-Century Holland

A. T. Van Deursen

Excerpt

[More information](#)

PART I

Daily Bread

Chapter I

PEOPLE OF LITTLE WISDOM AND
LIMITED POWER

On Christmas eve, 1593, a severe storm landed three rich Delft brewers in such serious financial difficulties that they were unable to meet their obligations. Soon afterwards their collapse brought down others as well, and the entire Delft brewing industry, once so flourishing, began to decay.¹ This is how the seventeenth-century historian Pieter Bor explains the beginning of the decline of the breweries of Delft. Yet nowadays we are likely to find his explanation unsatisfactory. To our way of thinking, if the major industry of Delft was really flourishing in 1593, it should certainly have withstood a few strong winds. And if Delft brewing still appeared to be declining twenty years later,² we are even less inclined to believe that a calm Christmas eve in 1593 could have been its salvation.

Nonetheless, Bor helps us to understand two important points better. First, we see the extreme fragility of seventeenth-century prosperity. One day of bad weather is mentioned in the chronicles of the time as an irreparable blow to the most important industry in one of the largest cities of Holland. Also, we see that even in a period of economic growth in such a small place as the province of Holland, there were all kinds of variations and exceptions. Before we can accept historical accounts of Dutch prosperity, it must be demonstrated specifically for every industrial sector and city. An economy that was so sensitive to small crises frequently had to settle accounts. In an age of great expansion on the one hand and limited governmental control on the other, the bill had to be paid by the economically weakest members of society. We should hardly expect to find prosperity for the mass of the Dutch population in the seventeenth century.

Naturally there were differences among the population. Within the mass we can distinguish three separate groups, in descending order: the small bourgeois, the petty artisans, and the common people. The boundaries were fluid, largely determined by the practically unknowable and highly fluctuating factor of personal prosperity. 'Wherever there is a penny [*stuiver*] to be earned, ten hands try to grab it,' Baudartius declared in 1624.³ Since the beginning of the sixteenth century, the population of Holland had been growing rapidly, sometimes even explosively.⁴ Economic expansion gave the common people some chances to move up, but the population explosion meant that they were more likely to move down in the oversupplied labour market. Therefore we shall not try to divide the people into income groups; rather, we shall attempt a rough sketch of the material conditions

of life in various categories, arranged by occupation and profession: the urban craftsmen, small farmers and agricultural workers, sailors and fishermen, and finally soldiers. Those who were no longer able or willing to work for their daily bread will remain beyond the scope of this chapter.

I

Let us begin with the artisans in the cities, for they illustrate immediately how difficult it is to make further divisions of the working population. What could be more natural than to group the independent craftsmen with the petty bourgeoisie, and the apprentices with the poorer community? It may even be true: the ownership of their own little businesses could well have given small bosses a world-view different from that of their wage-earning servants. But there was hardly any material difference between their positions.⁵ The Amsterdam capital-tax register of 1585 lists not a single apprentice among the taxpayers, and only a handful of small tradesmen.⁶ A great number of masters of guilds could not afford even a single journeyman. Thus in 1581 in Leiden there was no more than one journeyman for every five or six masters.⁷ Of the more than fifty pinmakers who worked at Gorinchem in 1597, none was rich enough to carry on independent trade abroad. All of them had to live from day to day, buying new raw materials every week with the profits of their sales, because they had no capital reserves.⁸ It may safely be assumed that the standard of living of such masters was barely better than that of an apprentice.

Most of the time we do not know how high the workers' wages were,⁹ but it is readily understood that 'high' is not the right word in this context. The playwright who declared that in Holland everything was expensive except labour¹⁰ may have been looking for cheap applause, but he was probably not far from the truth. During the years of the war against Spain, wages always remained rather low despite moderate increases, as table 1 taken from sources relating to workers' wages, shows. Insofar as it is possible to draw a conclusion from these figures, they appear to suggest that the daily wage for a skilled worker around 1600 came to about fourteen st., and had risen half a century later to twenty st.¹¹ Can we justly call these wages low? There were undoubtedly artisans who had considerable incomes. In this table the shipwrights of Amsterdam stand out sharply, although it must be said that the figures come not from the workers themselves, but from their protesting customers,¹² who wanted to show that Amsterdam rates were extravagantly high. In Amsterdam we encounter other, more formidable incomes: a yearly wage of 400 guilders (in Dutch, 'gulden') with a free place to live for the master journeyman of a cloth-dyer,¹³ or a potter's journeyman earning 543 guilders per year.¹⁴ Some cases may involve lucky individuals, but there were certainly entire categories with reasonable to good earnings. At Amsterdam for example these included the certified weighing-scale carriers,¹⁵ the goldsmiths obviously, and to a somewhat lesser degree the building trades.¹⁶

But many workers were notoriously badly paid. Among them were the glass-blowers, who around 1650 enjoyed only ten st. a day and free beer – probably a limited freedom – and all unskilled labourers in general.¹⁷ Thus the wages of the fourteen st. in 1600 and twenty st. in 1650 should be considered those of a skilled Amsterdam worker. These are two important qualifying terms, because, according to the employers at least Amsterdam wages were comparatively high.¹⁸ In any case the spinners and weavers of Leiden earned substantially less: according to the testimony of their own employers not even enough to live.¹⁹ In 1577 Jan van Hout placed the blame for the great numbers of poor in Leiden squarely on the cloth industry.²⁰ At the time he may have put too much weight on that sector of the economy, but his view proved prophetic. Sixty years later the workers were so hard-pressed that they were willing, after a sixteen-hour day, to work paid overtime.²¹ That happened in May, 1637, thus in a season when there was much sunlight and consequently long working days. From the table it is already apparent that wages fluctuated according to the seasons: the unspecified figures probably refer to summer wages. The working day began at 4 or 5 a.m. in summertime, an hour later in

Table 1. *Wages of artisans in Holland*

<i>Year</i>	<i>Place</i>	<i>Occupation</i>	<i>Daily wage in stuivers</i>
1569	Delft	carpenter ²²	10
1579	Amsterdam	unskilled labourer ²³	8
1581		slater ²⁴	14
1600	Amsterdam	unskilled labourer ²³	10–11
1603		unskilled labourer ²³	13
1604		slater ²⁴	14
1609	Amsterdam	cloth-shearer ²⁵	14
1612	Haarlem	bleacher ²⁶	12
1617	Amsterdam	cloth-shearer ²⁷	14
1618	„	cloth-shearer ²⁷	15
1620		slater ²⁴	20
1620		mason ²⁴	20
1621		carpenter ²⁴	winter 16, summer 20
1624		mason ²⁴	winter 12, summer 18
1628	Amsterdam	cloth-shearer ²⁷	16
1631	„	cloth-shearer ²⁷	18
1633	„	cloth-maker ²⁸	18
1640	„	potter ²⁹	17–18
1641	„	shipwright ³⁰	30–40
1641	(elsewhere)	shipwright ³⁰	20–24
1641	Zaanstreek	shipwright ³¹	summer 26
1645		slater ²⁴	winter 18, summer 20
1646	Amsterdam	soapmaker ³²	30
1646	„	mason ³²	20
1646		cloth-shearer ³³	20

summer wages. The working day began at 4 or 5 a.m. in summertime, an hour later in winter; it lasted until 9 p.m. in summer, and in wintertime at least until 7 p.m. or later if possible.³⁴ Winter work-time reduced production and thereby wages. The carpenters and masons of Amsterdam saw their wages reduced by 12½ per cent in spring and autumn, and in winter by as much as 25 per cent. Calculated over the entire year, the result was that the average weekly wage came to about 90 per cent of the summer wage.³⁵ Workers must have rejoiced at the lengthening days:

What a comfort it is for the hard-working tradesman, because
his little daily wage will increase:
Although he can barely scratch out his daily bread.³⁶

Was this poetic licence, to say the wages of labour were minimal? Can the approximate subsistence level be determined?

Complete certainty on this point is not possible, but we do have several ways of investigating the matter further. We know that in the sixteenth century rye bread was the most important staple of the workers' diet. The bread consumption of a married couple with two young children has been estimated at five pounds a day. Furthermore it has been calculated that expenditure on bread could not exceed 44 per cent of family income. Anyone who exceeded this level fell below the subsistence line and became a pauper.³⁷ For Leiden we have a price series of twelve-pound loaves of rye bread, showing the yearly averages (see table 2).³⁸

If we assume for ease of calculation that the above-mentioned standard household would consume three loaves per week, then during this period the expenditure on bread would have fluctuated between 28.2 st. and 16.5 st. Those with an income of fourteen st. per day, or eighty-four st. per week, could afford to spend thirty-seven st. on bread, according to the 44 per cent rule. Even in the most expensive years they would not have gone hungry, provided they had regular employment. Unskilled and low-paid workers with their ten st. per day or sixty st. per week could spend as much as 26.4 st. on bread. Consequently they would have been in need only in 1597–9. However, these figures should be used with caution. In the first place it is probable that the poorest people consumed more than 2,500 grammes of bread per day: for those on marginal incomes, Blockmans and Prevenier estimated the figure at 3,200 grammes.³⁹ If so, the totals immediately look quite different: the weekly bread requirement rises to 44.8 pounds, and the weekly expenditure fluctuates

Table 2. *Prices of Rye bread at Leiden, twelve pound loaves (in stuivers)*

1596 8.1	1601 6.9	1606 5.5	1611 7.4	1616 7.6
1597 9.3	1602 6.8	1607 6.0	1612 7.9	1617 9.3
1598 9.4	1603 7.8	1608 7.8	1613 7.9	1618 7.6
1599 9.2	1604 7.2	1609 7.9	1614 7.2	1619 6.6
1600 8.3	1605 6.4	1610 7.2	1615 6.6	1620 6.4

between 20.5 and 31.1 st. The working people of Leiden would already be facing misery when the bread price exceeded seven st., or in seventeen of the twenty-five years listed in the table. Secondly, it would be simplistic to conclude that a daily wage of 10 st. produced a weekly income of 60 st., for it was exactly those lowest-paid workers who were least certain of regular employment. And thirdly, average figures always flatten out the peaks and valleys. Bread prices depended on imports and supplies available, and were thus subject to great variations. In truly hard times the official price of a twelve-pound loaf could rise to fourteen or fifteen st.⁴⁰ On the black market the price could go as high as twenty-four st.,⁴¹ but even a price of fourteen st. put bread beyond the reach of nearly all artisans.

There is yet another method. We can look for examples of incomes that we have reason to believe were cut down to the last penny. It seems likely that the States of Holland in 1577 would not have paid a penny more than necessary when they specified the pensions of two elderly nuns from the former convent in Dordrecht. Each would receive fifty guilders per year.⁴² In 1579 a similar sum was earmarked for the orphaned child of the bailiff of Beverwijk. The child itself had nothing, but people hoped 'to educate it to honour and virtue'.⁴³ Apparently that was still possible for one guilder per week. Perhaps even this was calculated rather generously for the sake of honour and virtue, because in Louris Jansz's farce of 1583, 'Onse Lieven Heers Minnevaer', a father who has fallen on hard times asks for twenty-five guilders for each of his children.⁴⁴ This was a modest request, because prices were rising in the 1580s. A nun from Loosduinen asked in 1586 for an increase in her pension, from fifty-five to eighty guilders, and the States of Holland approved.⁴⁵ They certainly would not have done so if they thought that a single woman could live on fifty-five guilders. The maintenance costs of prisoners of war in that period came to four st. per day, or about seventy-three guilders per year.⁴⁶ In 1602 these costs rose to ten st.,⁴⁷ or 182 guilders 10 st. per year. Obviously at that time a profit had to be made on them. But the new tariff probably also reflected a real rise in prices,⁴⁸ for the daily maintenance costs for the crew of a Dutch galley amounted to 61½ st. in 1598.⁴⁹ A certain Passchier Verdurmen, who asked for complete support from the parish charity of Zwartewaal in 1614, requested a weekly payment of two gld.⁵⁰ For children the sums were always lower. The almoners of Amsterdam usually maintained orphaned children for twenty st. per week.⁵¹

Let us now return to the question: were the workers' wages minimal? Around 1600 the typical wage was fourteen st. per day. That would amount to 218 gld. 10 st. per year, if the wages remained constant. Allowing in most cases a reduction of 10 per cent for seasonal fluctuations would leave an annual income of 196 gld. 13 st. This is, however, assuming continuous work and earnings throughout the year, which was almost certainly not so. Even if someone did have such good luck and earned nearly 200 gld., his problems were by no means over. On the basis of the foregoing data, we are not exaggerating when we set the minimum needs for an adult in 1600 at eighty gld., and for a child at half that sum. Then we must conclude that a young family could not live on the wages of a single healthy adult

1. *The cobbler's workshop*, by David Ryckaert III

breadwinner. Other members of the household also had to work, and large families with many children were condemned to seek help from public charity. Although wages were slowly rising, they could not keep pace with prices.⁵²

Thus the women of the working class had to work. Only women above the poverty level could allow themselves the luxury of specialising in the unpaid profession of housewife. For many there was no other choice but suffering hunger or going to work, and this was considered quite normal. Belonging to the working class meant that both husband and wife 'were forced to win their bread by work'.⁵³ In 1581 the working population at Leiden was nearly 30 per cent female.⁵⁴ Normally they worked in traditional female occupations: 'spinning, washing, scouring'.⁵⁵ Young girls became servants in wealthy households, housekeepers in their own houses, as for example Maarten Harpertsz. Tromp remembered from his youth: 'his mother washed the sailors' shirts and starched collars for money'.⁵⁶ Our playwrights tell us

about working women who earned money on the side through sewing and spinning.⁵⁷ Unmarried young women were thus probably drawn to the textile towns. Leiden owed its surplus of women over men to the many jobs for combers and spinners in the cloth industry.⁵⁸ The Amsterdam silk trade was already bringing the girls and women together in large workshops.⁵⁹

Women also operated small shops,⁶⁰ or sold goods door to door.⁶¹ These may have been part-time supplementary occupations, but we also encounter independent businesswomen, who took over the management of firms during the extended absence of their husbands, or when they became widows.⁶² Sometimes widows could even remain members of a guild after the death of their husbands.⁶³ Foreigners found these independent businesswomen one of the noteworthy sights of the country. While the men wasted their time doing nothing, Fynes Moryson said, women took care of all business.⁶⁴ Women in Holland were better able to do that, Antonio Carnero judged, because the men were addicted to drink.⁶⁵ Indeed, superficial observers could regard Holland as a woman's country, because thousands of men were away

2. *Spinster on her doorstep*, by Adriaen van Ostade



at sea. Nevertheless, women held an inferior position in the working world. Their wages were probably always low, even when they practised their trades well. An experienced bleach-girl of Haarlem in 1601 earned no more than eight stuivers per day,⁶⁶ the same as a poorly-paid unskilled labourer. While she was clearly at a disadvantage compared to men, at this time she may have been better off than women later in the seventeenth century, because she was seldom burdened with the roughest manual labour in unhealthy enterprises such as brick-making and salt-boiling works.⁶⁷ Those few women who were employed to do this work in the early part of the century were not known for their feminine charm and sweetness.⁶⁸ But a girl did not have much choice. Salt-shed or spinning wheel, day or night work, she mostly had to accept what her birthplace happened to offer. She had to endure long days in the Leiden cloth workshops, or long nights in the Wormer biscuit-bakery.⁶⁹

Neither women nor men had much influence on their fate. Did they try to get control of their working conditions? Unions were unknown in the seventeenth century, and other types of workers' organisations were still embryonic. The guilds often had a *gildebos*,⁷⁰ or support fund for widows, retired and disabled members, but employees were excluded from it. If they wanted to assure themselves of income in case of illness or disability, they could form *knechtsbossen*, provided that the guild and city authorities approved.⁷¹ During our period such associations already existed,⁷² but it is highly unlikely that they were significant.⁷³ Workers' wages were not high enough to provide great capital injections to a savings fund for mutual aid. Wages would have to rise first, and nearly all attempts to accomplish this end were fruitless. They were not very numerous anyway, and always limited to one sector of the economy. Examples of successful workers' protests, such as that of the Leiden bargemen's mates in 1609, are rare. There the issue was not wages but working conditions, which were changed in the workers' favour.⁷⁴

Sometimes workers tried to make agreements among themselves, for example to declare certain workshops 'dirty', that is to boycott them.⁷⁵ Some guilds, in particular the Amsterdam hatmakers, had cause to complain about conspiratorial apprentices.⁷⁶ But there were other trades that remained completely quiet: the biscuit-bakers of Wormer and Jisp were never involved in any conflict about wages.⁷⁷ Perhaps this point could be established for many more trades if it were researched systematically. We find fairly frequent labour unrest only among the journeymen cloth-shearers.⁷⁸ Occasionally they also went on strikes (for example, in Hoorn in 1639⁷⁹ and Leiden in 1643)⁸⁰ which ended in defeat for the strikers. No wonder, since all conditions for their success were lacking:⁸¹ the factory that brought all the workers together in daily companionship did not yet exist; the authorities always supported the employers, and regarded strikes as revolts plain and simple; and the overpopulation in Holland created an unusually unfavourable climate for demands for wage increases. These factors applied to nearly all trades. What little labour law existed, in the guild privileges, laid practically all obligations on the worker. Even his opportunity to resign voluntarily was sometimes restricted, in order to protect the bosses in busy times.⁸²

Yet we should not see the journeyman worker as a docile work-horse deprived of all rights. In his own modest way he too belonged among the privileged members of the community. Employers and workers probably stood shoulder to shoulder in the fight against mechanisation. Both their interests were served by the 1623 declaration of Holland limiting the number of ribbon-mills, which manufactured hair-ribbons and garters 'to the noteworthy damage, even total ruin, of many thousands of people, who make the same ribbons with foot-powered looms'.⁸³ This 'thousands' certainly did not come from a statistical count. But pressure of the same kind could have slowed down the development of industrial mills in the first decades of the seventeenth century.⁸⁴ The council of Rotterdam in 1637 was unable to carry out plans for the building of a large fulling-mill. The gentlemen who were supposed to survey the site were 'placed in evident fear of their lives' by an angry public, and thought the price of technical improvement too high.⁸⁵

Furthermore, the guild was the journeyman's guarantee that he would keep his work and his daily bread, even though Holland was overrun with foreigners. In the guild he sought protection against competition from foreigners, people from other regions of the Republic, Hollanders from other towns and villages, and fellow townsmen who had not passed through the guild apprenticeship. He was quite willing to restrict the number of jobs,⁸⁶ or tried to reserve them for native-born inhabitants. According to the guild regulations of 1623, if an Amsterdam carpenter was unemployed, he could always demand the job of a foreign journeyman.⁸⁷ Now it is true that the mere existence of legal regulations proves little, even less in the seventeenth century than in the twentieth. Control and enforcement of the regulations were more important, and on just those points the Amsterdam carpenters did have success. In 1640 it appears that the journeymen of the shipwrights' guild were powerful enough to insist on the very high daily wage of 36 st., for a working day of only twelve hours.⁸⁸ An earlier attempt by the employers to lengthen the working day had failed: the fourteen-hour day introduced in 1621 had to be reduced in 1625 owing to 'great complaints'.⁸⁹ In the shipwrights we encounter a group of workers who knew how to share in the profits of Amsterdam's position as the marketplace of the world. Merchants and ship's captains wanted to reduce idle time in the harbour to an absolute minimum: as soon as their ships were seaworthy again, they sought to take advantage of the first favourable wind. When large ships came in, the shipowners not only paid the shipwrights full wages but also gave them free meals in order to speed up the work. The exploitation of such opportunities assured the Amsterdam journeymen of their abnormally favoured position for that time. They even took along with them the casual labourers, more of whom were hired at busy times. With daily wages of thirty st.,⁹⁰ these men also earned considerably more than the average workers.

Such opportunities were more frequently found in Amsterdam. When in the autumn the Baltic fleet sailed in, and everyone wanted his grain unloaded first, the grain-porters raised their demands, and their daily wages sometimes tripled.⁹¹ The same tactic was used by the cloth-shearers in 1628, when they went on strike just