Summary

In much historical research it is assumed that the poor had a distinctly deviant way of life, and that therefore boards of guardians acted in a disciplinary way by offering relief only if the poor reformed and adopted middleclass values. The two issues discussed in this book derive from this idea. Firstly, this study focuses on the question what considerations were the bases of relief for jobless casual labourers between 1880 and 1930. In this context the two national Poor Laws in The Netherlands – of 1854 and 1912 – are discussed. I also try to trace if those who lived on the Leeuwarden parish led lives that were markedly different from the rest of the Leeuwarden population: the so-called culture of poverty.

However, this method is possible and fruitful only because Leeuwarden (capital of the northern province of Friesland) boasts a long row of Charity Records, which were begun in 1893. At first, volunteers or buurthezoekeurs drew up these reports of visits to the poor, but after 1898 professionals made the reports. Between these professionals and the poor themselves there was not such a great social gap at all. The reports supply information on the poor from which their standards and values can be deduced. The detailed information in the reports makes it possible to discover why the board of guardians granted some requests for relief and rejected others. It is possible therefore to analyse their policy on a minute scale. These yards of tomes constitute the main and most laborious source of this study. I have selected the reports of two different periods – 1894 till 1897 and 1922 till 1925 – for this book. In the following pages the two chief issues will be discussed, starting with the question why charity was distributed to the unemployed.

Why relief at all?
The relief payments granted in the twenties were almost like golden handshakes compared with the relief moneys of 30 years previously. In the eighteen nineties the weekly relief money amounted to an average of NGL 0.80. In the twenties this had risen to NGL 5.60, an increase of more than 500% allowing for currency erosion. The Leeuwarden Stadsarmenkamer – an institution that decided on granting relief on behalf of the town council – was chaired by the butter tradesman Roelof Buisman, who accounted for this considerable increase by pointing to the influence of the new Poor Law of 1912: "In the past our Public Poor Relief was just a police matter, but as a result of the present Poor Law the powers of local boards of guardians have become so much wider that we are obliged to preserve people from ruin, even if this entails some hundreds of
In other respects, too, social security had evolved. In the twenties a small group of the unemployed did not feel the need to apply to the Stadsarmenkamer. Instead, they could draw on steunregelingen, i.e. special relief funds not within the jurisdiction of poor relief; or they were entitled – provided they were insured – to a certain benefit from a local unemployment fund. More and more elderly people were provided with old-age pensions. There was little reason in the eighteen nineties to suspect that social security was to change so drastically in such a short period.

My study deals with the question what the principal motives were in the further development of social security, or putting it bluntly: why this willingness to spend money on poor relief all the time? It is tempting to emphasise one of the motives discussed – such as discipline, labour market factors, humanitarian considerations or the fear of social turmoil –, so strongly that a monocausal, orderly interpretation of history is arrived at. The American historian Katz, however, characterises the development of social policy as ‘messy’ and ‘untidy’: ”Social institutions have served multiple, often contradictory purposes; coalitions with widely divergent interests and goals have sponsored reform and policy. Still, like all history, it is messy, full of ironies and inconsistencies.”

Obviously, he rejects a monocausal interpretation of the incoherent development of the welfare state. But his approach is not entirely convincing: he should not really dispose of the problem so lightly. Most historians concerned with the development of social security would endorse the view taken by Lis, Soly and Van Damme in Op vrije voeten? They claim that social policies were biased towards moralising, normalising, disciplining and integration of the working classes. As a result of the social security system the poor were allegedly forced to conform to the established culture. In chapter two I try to show that the argumentation for this theory is inadequate.

It is relatively simple to find an answer to the question what started off the development of social security on a national scale. The two Poor Laws, of 1854 and 1912, are important features. The character of the 1854 Poor Law is closely related to the motive of fear of turmoil: outdoor relief was to be granted only if “absolutely inevitable”, and as a form of policing. During the debates of 1912 in the Lower House, the then Secretary of State, Heemskerk, referred to this idea behind the previous Poor Law. The new law created possibilities for a more generous local policy. In these parliamentary debates it also transpired that there had been a change in attitudes towards the poor, probably as a result of various parliamentary surveys of the living conditions of the workers. The more favourable view which the legislator held of prospective persons on the dole paved the way to a somewhat fairer legislation. However, the greater scope for social benefits should not be allowed to obstruct the labour market mechanism. The authorities attempted to stop “unnecessary” benefits to the best of their abilities, by keeping them at a level where looking for work would remain an attractive alternative. The notion of changing poor people’s lifestyles did not really crop up in national policies. The only exception to this rule was alcohol abuse: in cases of repeated abuse both Poor Laws made it possible to refuse relief for this reason. Nationally, a moderately humanitarian motive started to replace the former “fear of turmoil” motive after 1912. The higher unemployment benefits that resulted called for further control of the labour mar-

1. Katz, Improving Poor People, 9 (quotation), cf also: 5 ff. and 31.
ket. The question in hand is how the four different motives lay to each other locally, that is, in Leeuwarden.

There is the motive of social control. The catch here is, ironically, the striking discrepancy between the general image on the one hand and reality on the other, the policies advocated and the policy actually pursued. In 1893 the municipal executive argued in favour of the introduction of the Elberfeld System on the basis of the moral impact made by the charity volunteers. Moral edification of the Leeuwarden poor would supposedly be promoted. Once the system was operational nothing came of this in actual practice. There was then very little social control of people affected by alcohol abuse, living together or living on prostitution. In the 1890s relief was often granted in cases of alcohol abuse anyhow, because the Armenkamer felt that wife and children should not be the ones to suffer. Once the volunteers had established excessive financial stringency, financial relief was generally a matter of course. Even if the desire for social control had actually been felt, such a policy would have met with little success. Firstly, because there was little scope for control: aberrant behaviour was relatively rare among recipients of relief – a phenomenon to be discussed in the next section. Secondly, the amount to be granted by the volunteers was so small that it would never even start to affect patterns of behaviour. This definitely suggests that the guardians were not particularly concerned with ‘edification’ of the poor man, but with mitigating the direst need, in order to avert social turmoil.

In the 1920s too, there was no active and deliberate policy on the part of the relief authorities to force the poor to conform to middle class values. In cases where the recipients of relief took a rather militant position vis-à-vis the volunteers, they were still granted relief or were provided with relief work. It is true that, in the '20s, the guardians seldom granted relief to persons addicted to alcohol – which they still did in the 1890s. Nevertheless, it was not unusual for such people to get some advance business capital, however small the chance of repayment. Addicts were usually offered a job in a relief works programme. If an alcoholic’s application was rejected at all, it was not an instance of social control. In such a case the guardians generally assumed, as in cases of prostitution, that there was apparently sufficient income. Relief was not offered by way of the proverbial carrot, the reward for the change in their behaviour. It was simply understood that, if only they did not drink they would have enough money. The Armenkamer focused basically on incomes of families applying for relief, though not only to avoid spending money unnecessarily: generous benefits would not only make havoc of municipal funds but of the labour market as well.

This leads to the second possible motive: the labour market. Superficially, it would seem that the extremely sparing relief given by the Leeuwarden Stadsarmenkamer in the 1890s is explained by the fact that regulation of the labour market was a major consideration. The Armenkamer gave relief, of course, especially in winter, when demand for labour was little. Again, the absence of relief in summer would suggest that regulation of the labour market was one of the main objectives in social security. This was not the case, however. Applications for relief in the summers were not rejected because granting the requests would discourage the jobless to look for work; relief money was far too low.
for that. One guilder a week was of course absolutely insufficient to subsist on: those on the dole would therefore have to keep looking for employment. This is why the guardians granted almost 90% of all requests for relief. In the relatively rare cases of rejection, the argument was mostly that there was ‘sufficient’ income, or that applications should be submitted to a different institution for poor relief. The volunteers were certainly not aware of any labour market aspect to poor relief. We know of no statements by volunteers urging the day labourers or their families to mend their efforts and look for work. In the 1920s, however, it was quite customary for welfare officers to do so. All in all, it may be claimed that up to 1912, when the old Poor Law still prevailed, there was no question of deliberate regulation of the labour market. Owing to the minute relief moneys the labour market mechanism was not disturbed.

This changed drastically when, during the Great War, the Leeuwarden guardians consistently started raising the relief benefits. One consequence of this rise in the unemployment benefits was a much closer examination of the petitioners’ incomes, partly in order to spare the municipal budget, partly in an attempt not to disturb the labour market. Therefore, relief could be granted only when every other means to obtain some sort of income had failed. The relief officers thoroughly checked if parents and older children had tried hard enough to find employment. It is evident that the attitudes prevailing in relief bodies had undergone changes since 1912. This is also supported by the much higher percentage of applications that were rejected. As can be seen in table 6.12, nearly half the number of applications for financial support were rejected. The argument most usually adduced was that petitioners should make greater efforts to find work. It was strongly felt that the unemployed should remain active in the labour market. For that purpose the Armenkamer had been able – since 1916 – to use relief works programmes as an additional tool to regulate the labour market. As there was some reluctance to grant relief to day labourers, the latter could thus be tested on their willingness to accept work. In cases where jobless people did not use the opportunity of a place in a relief works programme, the Armenkamer would conclude that their financial straits were not particularly dire.

The third motive discussed is the humanitarian motive. As early as the 19th century this sort of consideration featured prominently only in the shape of generous, free medical and obstetric support by the Armenkamer. In cases like these, namely support for the sick and for pregnant women, as well as for elderly people with a disability for instance, it is unlikely that regulation of the labour market or fear of social unrest will have been a weighty consideration. In these circumstances the grounds for support will probably have been of a humanitarian nature where, incidentally, regular recipients received a somewhat higher allowance that the jobless. This humanitarian motive did not really figure at all in the case of support for the unemployed. Financial assistance did not amount to much at the start of the 20th century: about 75 cents a week during a 10-week period.

In the 1912 Poor Law, humanitarian considerations are quite explicit. Chapter 5 mentions the illustration given by the then Prime Minister, Abraham Kuyper, during the parliamentary debates on the bill: a widow struggling hard to keep her small corner shop running. This shows that legislators were especially concerned about those who aroused pity: widows, invalids and the like, but certainly not able-bodied day labourers who
were temporarily without work. The effect of these humanitarian considerations was obviously influenced by the image one had of the group of the poor concerned. If it was a favourable one, support was somewhat more generous. Of course, old habits prevailing with the municipal boards of guardians did not disappear overnight, after the introduction of the new law. From then on, relief officers and the guardians themselves even more so, had to revise their outlook as regards the petitioners for relief. There is a remarkable parallel with a similar change, the one towards more humane regimes in prisons after World War II: innovation was virtually impossible as long as the implementation of it was the responsibility of those civil servants that had held a competition for the best design of handcuffs, only a few years previously.

The fact that Leeuwarden relief officers soon operated in the spirit of the new Poor Law was not, therefore, the result of the favourable view they held of the poor. The new policy was more or less enforced. It was hardly possible not to grant to the day labourers the somewhat higher allowances given to the poor by the local relief committees, during the Great War. It is true that these allowances were raised during the war, but the guardians of the Armenkamer had continued to talk about the jobless in negative terms. The tune improved to some extent only when the guardians had fewer direct dealings with the unemployed, as a result of the Armenkamer joining 'Drie Provinciën'. This intermunicipal institution then dealt with allocation and payment of the jobless in relief work programmes.

The fourth and last motive to be discussed is fear of social unrest. In the 1880s this was the chief consideration for the introduction of special winter relief. When, some dozen years later, the relief volunteers visited the poor they felt intimidated. A quarter of all day labourers adopted an assertive or even aggressive attitude towards the volunteers. As a consequence, the guardians were urgently requested to grant relief. However, in this period the fear of unrest led to very diverse measures in different situations and at different moments. At first the guardians submitted under the pressure of the poor, but from 1897 they took a tough stand by restricting relief to the jobless, and by appointing a professional relief officer. In his capacity of unsalaried constable he was armed against the labourers' aggression. Apparently, fear of social turmoil as such did not necessarily lead to a lasting, generous relief policy.

In the early years of the Great War some major towns saw the foundation of local relief committees. These committees supported the workers who had lost their jobs owing to the wartime conditions. Day labourers were, of course, unemployed every winter, and did not qualify for this form of support. In actual fact, however, it was hard to make the distinction between the two groups of unemployed, so that those who had always been dependent on the Armenkamer, could now also benefit from the more generous support given by the new committee. After some time it became possible to keep the two groups – the wartime unemployed and the traditional seasonal unemployed – apart; the latter group was granted relief by the Armenkamer again. Now that the day labourers had experienced the higher dole given by the committees, the Armenkamer felt the need to raise its own relief payments. This peculiar combination of the humanitarian motive – the 1912 Poor Law – and the motive of fear of turmoil led to prompt increases in relief payments in Leeuwarden.
The poor and the culture of poverty?
The first chapter gives an account of Hendrik Algra – for nearly half a century chief editor of a Christian newspaper, *Friesch Dagblad*. He pours out the vials of his wrath upon a clergyman “dabbling in sociology”. The clergyman claimed that poverty stank, and this, Algra felt, was very insulting, especially for his own parents, who had coped with the miserable poverty of the late 19th century in such an exemplary manner. Many affluent people in the 19th century held the view that large sections of the working classes led lives that deviated from the norm, and that they ought to be reformed by, for instance, education and poor relief. Well-to-do citizens in the 19th and early 20th centuries had a low opinion of the poor. This opinion is reflected in the scholarly work of Oscar Lewis, in which he postulates the culture of poverty. Lewis himself conceded that the concept is a little misleading. According to him, not all the poor, but only 20% of them lived in a culture of poverty. Besides poverty there are, therefore, more or different variables responsible for creating such a way of life. The conclusion in Chapter I was that the term ‘poverty’ is a little unfortunate in this context. In view of Lewis’s characteristics of the culture of poverty it appeared to be quite hard to distinguish between his culture of poverty on the one hand, and antisocial behaviour on the other; the characteristics tend to overlap.

In the discussion of Lewis’s ideas the family situation and the social integration of the family are two different aspects. The set of criteria that, I think, could determine whether there was a strongly deviating way of life are closely connected to these two areas. The family situation comprised such things as alcohol addiction, crime, civil status and the religious denomination of the family. Truancy and membership of a burial society determined social integration of the family. Moreover, it was possible to trace some possible differences between the poor and other members of contemporary Leeuwarden society, namely those regarding religion and civil status. Two important aspects discussed are non-denominationalism and living together. Should these two phenomena occur quite frequently among recipients of relief, this would point to a deviating way of life. In neither case, however, is there any significant difference between recipients of relief on the one hand, and the Leeuwarden citizenry as a whole on the other. At the end of the 19th century, non-denominationalism as an attested phenomenon was extremely rare, and if it occurred at all, it was equally exceptional among recipients and other Leeuwarden adults alike. By the mid nineteen twenties, non-denominationalism had risen to about 20% of the Leeuwarden population, but then again, there were no significant differences between those who were on the dole and those who were not. Living together was also far from common. Official registers did not attest this sort of situation, but volunteers’ and welfare officers’ observations seem to suggest that it occurred in only a few percentage points of the recipients. The majority of those who lived together were actually joined in ‘holy matrimony’.

Other phenomena that might throw more light on the recipients’ set of values have also been studied. First and foremost, from the 1830s onwards the majority of the poor were members of a burial society. The poorest of the poor could apparently afford, every week again, to save the membership fee of about 25 cents for the burial society. This suggests that they had internalised the bourgeois virtue of self-restraint, more than any other section of the population. Some 70% of the Leeuwarden petitioners for relief were
members of burial societies in the 1890s, a percentage that had risen to almost 80 a quarter of a century later. There were those who, at some stage, had been members, but could no longer pay their fees. Had the poor and needy completely squandered their earnings, that would have confirmed the way in which the poor were regarded by their wealthier contemporaries. But in this respect, too, the moneyed classes appeared to be prejudiced.

Whereas 14% of recipients were given to drink in the 1890s, this was only 7% some twenty-five years later. The drink-demon wielded power over a tiny minority. A number of these alcoholics were single and socially isolated. They usually lived in boarding houses, for instance. Yet, unfortunately, alcohol abuse mostly occurred in the family. This does not mean, however, that the addiction should necessarily be regarded as a cultural feature. It was not always a matter of counterculture in such cases. Alcohol addiction in this form may also be brought about by the personality of the worker thus affected.

I have not been able to find any indications of the transmission of poverty from one generation to the next, as a result of upbringing. A high truancy rate could be an indication for this, but it cannot be found in Leeuwarden between 1880 and 1930.

The above conclusions show that in the case of the Leeuwarden day labourers the culture of poverty did not exist. This means that, by and large, they conformed to the dominant culture. This conclusion applies to the years between 1880 and 1930 only. It may well be that, either before 1880 or after 1930, the culture of poverty did exist. On the other hand, historical research – especially by Douwes, Van Leeuwen and Pot – into the living conditions of the poor in the first half of the 19th century has not established the existence of this way of life. This does not necessarily imply that such a culture did not exist; the scholars mentioned above never focused on mapping out this particular field. Further research into this problem may produce more evidence. Again, it is not inconceivable that the deviant way of life developed only when, in the process of post-war reconstruction, many dilapidated urban districts entirely changed in character as regards their population. Contemporary studies into a culture of poverty among the poor in late 20th century Holland were mentioned in chapter one section 4, but are beyond the scope of the problem discussed in the present study.

Conclusion
In a study of the motives for poor relief three separate levels are to be distinguished. There is first of all the national or macro level. On this level, more especially in the 1854 Poor Law, the motive of fear of turmoil was prevalent before 1912. On a meso level, however, this fear of unrest as the major motive for its policy could only be voiced behind the closed doors of the Leeuwarden Council. For the general public the Council promulgated the cosmetic message of edification of the poor. This laudable message was also printed in the explanatory statement of 1893 on the occasion of the introduction of the Elberfeld System. In the late 1880s and early 1890s, the motive of fear of turmoil was never mentioned publicly in the debate on relief works programmes, although it was certainly on people's minds. We also showed that, on a micro level, despite the fine phrases on social control, many – very slender – benefits were granted, few petitions were rejected, and that volunteers were initially put off by the militant attitude of the unemployed.
The tendency in the majority of the population to maintain the established order of things leads to the creation of a negative image of the underclasses. Essentially, Lewis’s culture of poverty may be regarded as one more version of this image. It also stresses the view that the poor had to blame themselves for their unfortunate living conditions, owing to their deviating culture. On this issue Galbraith observes that the well-to-do also remained quite sceptical about their own negative image of the poor: “None of this, of course, is quite believed; it serves, nonetheless, to justify the comfortable position and policy.”

Galbraith defines this mentality of the established classes as the *culture of contentment*. Wertheim, referring to the upper-class lack of interest in the lower sections of society, calls it *elitewaan* or elitist delusion. An important ingredient of this elitist delusion, according to Wertheim, is the repression of all sorts of miserable aspects of social reality from our consciousness. Wertheim claims that when the wealthy do actually get faced with real poverty, there will be a strong tendency in many of them to brush aside or argue away such poverty. The process of suppressing the motive of social unrest seems to dovetail into what Elias calls the ‘process of civilisation’. In Europe after the Middle Ages, according to him, phenomena that were increasingly felt to be painful were hidden away, off the social stage. In this context Elias refers to the tendency to cover up death. However, we may also think of suppressing the real grounds for poor relief. Fear of social unrest as a motive for measures in the field of material relief is not the most suitable vehicle to gain public sympathy. Consequently, this motive was covered up and replaced by texts about edification of the poor. All this changed when the allowances were raised during the Great War. The motive of social unrest faded into the background, and the emphasis that had hitherto been placed on the necessity of moral edification of the poor wore off gradually. It was replaced by humanitarian motives, which, in turn, were largely qualified by the desire not to disturb the labour market mechanism by the increase in social security.

*Translated by Ité Wierenga*

---
