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Under the Cover of Education? The Politicization of Education Movements in Nineteenth-century Germany, Britain and the Netherlands

[Anne Heyer](#)

In April 1872 the Dutch Protestant minister Abraham Kuyper demanded that the municipality of Amsterdam established a new school. As Kuyper wrote in his newspaper *De Standaard*, the religious authorities of the Dutch Reformed Church had given their approval, and the municipality had to take the next steps: '[w]e have good courage, that the municipality will not stay behind, but will haste to bring together the funds necessary for the construction of the schools.'¹ Despite the politeness in the quote, Kuyper informed his readers, in an alarming tone, that only one tenth of the children of the city was attending schools. This concern for education was typical for nineteenth-century Europe.

Inspired by the idea that the future of the community was created in class rooms, education activism was shared in various ideological camps.² More importantly, education activists directly contributed to the emergence of mass politics. In addition to his role as spokesman for the education movement

of Orthodox Protestantism, Kuyper was the founder of the Anti-Revolutionary Party, the first modern party in the Netherlands to mobilize ordinary people to influence parliament.

In this paper, I study the role of education activism in the transformation of nineteenth-century political culture. I first offer a short comparative analysis of three organizations that used education to mobilize support. In a second step, I will focus on the Dutch example of Orthodox Protestantism to show how education could be reinterpreted to justify mass politics. The three organizations are the Dutch Anti-School Law League (Anti-Schoolwet Verbond), the British National Education League and the German Federation of German Workers' Associations (Vereinstag Deutscher Arbeiterverein). These three organizations differed in their specific agenda, but they shared the criticism on existing institutions of education. In the absence of state interference in education in Britain, the purpose of the National Education League was to lobby for the introduction of universal elementary education. In the Netherlands, the Anti-School Law League likewise presented an opposition to the existing political elite. But the activism of Orthodox Protestants was directed against extending state control over elementary schools, which was the political project of the Liberal majority in parliament. In the German states, elementary education was implemented so comprehensively that it made sense for the Federation of German Workers' Association to focus on adult education.

Education activists in all three movements skillfully used the widely-discussed topic of education to mobilize a sufficiently high number of followers for their national organization. Referring to education, they established a semantic connection between their private interests and a higher moral objective. In the case of the Dutch Anti-School Law League, parents and non-parents alike could be gathered around the question: how should children be prepared for life? Founded in 1872, the members of the Dutch League saw public schools as a threat to the salvation of the nation, but also specifically to 'our offspring'.³ The only acceptable form of education was one that 'aims at guiding our children to the Savior'.⁴ Also in Germany at the founding congress of the Federation of German Workers' Association, the shoe-maker Johann Peter Eichelsdörfer referred to the low educational standard of his own social group: 'The worker of our day is predominantly suffering from the pressure of ignorance'.⁵ 'Clumsiness and immobility' were one problem, deficits had to be also recognized in 'aspiration and economy'.⁶ Education not only offered the opportunity to improve the material living conditions of workers. The organization was to support the '[s]triving for political, bourgeois and economic elevation of the working class'.⁶

In Britain, the members of the National Education League seemed to play a less outspoken role. At the founding congress in Birmingham in 1869, delegate Anthony John Mundella, MP for Sheffield, referred to the education systems of Prussia and Switzerland, whose schools produced results superior to the British voluntary system. He had never met 'a man in the country who could not correspond intelligently with his employer, nor a child of ten or twelve years of age who could not read and write as well as myself'.⁷ The more disappointing was the situation at home: 'that brutal ignorance, that terrible destitution, which I met in my own country'.⁸ This wider appeal, based on observations in foreign circumstances, was necessary because most supporters of the British League were accustomed to private teaching and not as immediately affected by public education as their Dutch or German counterparts. But British activists shared with education activists abroad the ability to frame the problem of education as if directly concerned their community. For executive committee member, Joseph Chamberlain, Britain's 'position among the nations' was an important argument, but eventually the value of education was to be found in the more immediate surrounding of the delegates. The question of education concerned the 'future of your own class, and perhaps of your families'.⁹ Education was a good catalyst for social mobilization, because movement leaders like Chamberlain related the personal interests of followers to the common good of their community.

Education activism also offered the opportunity to give a higher moral meaning to criticism of existing political structures. A key component in this changing narrative was to present the masses as an entity separate from political incumbents. Education activists mobilized their followers under different ideological banners. They shared the claim of representing the people against a corrupted selfish elite

– they adjusted the diagnostic side of the frame of education. While before it was the masses who were in need of social support, the movements took a more aggressive stance by blaming the elites for collective suffering. In this way, the appropriate course of action changed: instead of moral activism, a more radical form of collective action was needed. The leaders of the Dutch Anti-School Law League, which serves here as a short example, pointed to ordinary men, even women as potential members of the constituency of discriminated Orthodox Protestants. Every citizen, willing to pay the modest annual fee of 50 cents and sign its petition, could join the organization.¹⁰ Kuyper maintained this focus on unprivileged ordinary farmers and the lower parts of the middle classes by coining the iconic phrase of the ‘small people’ (kleine luyden) that supposedly suffered under the Liberal school legislation.¹¹ The belief in the masses, represented in the size of supporters, was so strong that the organizers committed to 10,000 signatures for its petition. In fact, the instrument of the petition followed a general consideration that numbers were important in nineteenth-century Dutch society. When parliament nevertheless went through with legislation, the leaders of the Dutch League could argue that the political elite had disregarded the voices of 469,000 citizens.¹²

This large group of underrepresented Orthodox Protestants became the manifestation of the nation as a whole.¹³ In his newspaper, Kuyper evoked the quantity of his followers to demonstrate his political power. Despite the limited educational background of followers, they still constituted an important political force against the existing elite: ‘unfortunately, among ‘even more stupid farmers’ are yet also many voters.’¹⁴ Later Kuyper modified this argument by stating that ordinary Orthodox Protestants were discriminated by the existing franchise.¹⁵ This sort of aggressive style was probably a response to the critical Liberal press that wrote that Kuyper’s supporters ‘usually do not have a clue about anything’ and followed him ‘obediently, even blindly.’¹⁶ For Kuyper, it provided the opportunity to transform education activism into the practice of mass politics. While initially treated as a social problem, he used education to justify political action, whose specific features were unprecedented. The defining feature of the Anti-Revolutionary Party, founded in 1879, was its claim to represent the masses of ordinary people, and its founder promised the implementation of this claim in membership structure. Drawing a rhetorical line between the masses and the elite, Kuyper added an element of urgency to the discourse, which, eventually, justified new forms of political practices. He argued that in the past their movements had tried to solve the problem of education with the help of education organizations. But because the problem of education was severe and the political elites kept ignoring his suggestions for reform, these attempts were not powerful enough. Only by achieving direct representation in political institutions, Orthodox Protestants could change policy and improve education in the Netherlands.

In contrast to more conventional conceptions of education as a purely socio-economic variable, this approach focuses on the way contemporaries gave different meaning to education to create political principles and practices of modern democracy. Education activists pushed the boundaries of acceptable political behavior and established norms and institutions to include the masses in more active and direct ways in politics. Initially education was described as a problem of the social sphere, detached from broader questions of politics. This allowed activists to organize discontent about existing social condition in a broad movement, without antagonizing the influential spokesmen of their community, who in most parts looked critical upon ideas of mass mobilization. In a second step, they reinterpreted education as requiring radical political innovation by pointing to the discrimination of their community in exiting political institutions. If taken seriously, experiences like the one of Abraham Kuyper show how focusing on education helps political historians to study agency in the coming of mass politics.

1. “Binnenland,” *De Standaard*, April 22, 1872, 2, Delpher. [\[D\]](#)

2. Amadine Thiry et al., “(Re-)Educational Internationalism in the Low Countries, 1850-1914,” in *The Civilising Offensive: New Perspectives on Social and Educational Reform in 19th-Century Belgium* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019). [\[D\]](#)

3. J. A. Geerth van Wijk, “Een woord over het Anti-Schoolwet Verbond” (G.J. Reits, 1873), 8, <http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:xGzvNnqh1TQJ:leesmuseum.bibliotheekarnhem.nl/Books/mp-pdf-bestanden/LM02460.pdf+&cd=4&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=nl>. [\[D\]](#)

4. Wijk, 2. [[↗](#)]
5. Ausschuss des Vereinstages, “Bericht über die Verhandlungen des ersten Vereinstages der deutschen Arbeitervereine,” in *Berichte über die Verhandlungen der Vereinstage deutscher Arbeitervereine 1863 bis 1869*, ed. Dieter Dowe, Nachdrucke (Berlin: Dietz, 1980), 9. [[↗](#)]
6. Ausschuss des Vereinstages, 9. [[↗](#)] [[↗](#)]
7. National Education League, “Report of the First General Meeting of Members of the National Education League: Held at Birmingham, on Tuesday and Wednesday, Oct. 12 & 13, 1869” (The Journal, 1869), 209, <http://books.google.nl/books?id=VnsWAAAAIAAJ&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false>. [[↗](#)]
8. National Education League, 210. [[↗](#)]
9. National Education League, 215. [[↗](#)]
10. “Statuten van Het Anti-Schoolwet-Verbond,” *De Standaard*, February 8, 1872, Delpher, <http://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=ddd:011065322:mpeg21:a0005>. [[↗](#)]
11. Roel Kuiper, “De Weg van het volk. Mobilisering en activering van de Antirevolutionaire beweging, 1878-1888,” in *De eenheid & de delen: zuilvorming, onderwijs en natievorming in Nederland, 1850-1900*, ed. Henk te Velde and Hans Verhage (Amsterdam: Het Spinhuis, 1996), 99–119; Henk te Velde, *Stijlen van leiderschap: persoon en politiek van Thorbecke tot Den Uyl* (Amsterdam: Wereldbibliotheek, 2002), chap. 2; Arko van Helden, “De ‘kleine luyden’ van Abraham Kuiper – een vorm van populistische retoriek?,” *Negentiende Eeuw* 35, no. 3 (2011): 139–53. [[↗](#)]
12. Figures are calculated on the basis of Annemarie Houkes, *Christelijke vaderlanders: godsdienst, burgerschap en de nederlandse natie (1850-1900)* (Amsterdam: Wereldbibliotheek, 2009), 205. [[↗](#)]
13. Ido de Haan, *Het beginsel van leven en wasdom: de constitutie van de Nederlandse politiek in de negentiende eeuw*, De natiestaat (Amsterdam: Wereldbibliotheek, 2003). [[↗](#)]
14. “De Juni-stembus,” *De Standaard*, April 14, 1879, 1, Delpher. [[↗](#)]
15. Ron de Jong, “Het antirevolutionaire volk achter de kiezers. De mythe van een leuze. De electorale aanhang van de ARP rond 1885 en in 1918,” *BMGN – Low Countries Historical Review* 123, no. 2 (January 1, 2008): 185–96. [[↗](#)]
16. “In Duisternis,” *Het Nieuws van Den Dag: Kleine Courant*, June 15, 1879, 2, Delpher. [[↗](#)]

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