

Patrick Bek, *No Bicycle, No Bus, No Job: The Making of the Workers' Mobility in the Netherlands, 1920-1990* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021, 212 pp., ISBN 9789463723183).

Eindhoven University of Technology seems an unusual place to defend a PhD thesis on a historical subject. It is not so odd if you realise that the university hosts both the 'Eindhoven History Lab' and the Foundation of the History of Technology, the latter being famous for its series about the Dutch history of technology in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, edited by Harry Lintsen in the 1990s. This research groups' focus on the interaction between technological artefacts and various actors gives its research a unique place in the Dutch landscape of historical scholarship.

In this context, Patrick Bek has contributed to this scholarship with a labour historical approach. His thesis, entitled *No Bicycle, No Bus, No Job: The Making of the Workers' Mobility in the Netherlands, 1920-1990*, deals with the interaction between work and mobility by studying the main industrialised regions in the Netherlands: Eindhoven with its main employer Philips, Twente for its textile industry, the port of Rotterdam, the mines in Limburg and the Hoogovens in IJmuiden. The labour history approach entails the study of the power relations between workers, employers and the state. Concerning mobility, workers were either living near the factory or commuting over larger distances and in the latter case they had to make use of a certain means of transportation. The choice of a means of transport was influenced by the employers, the availability of (public or private) travel options and governmental policies. The question Bek tries to answer is: to what extent were workers able to control the means of transport from and to their work?

The book has a chronological composition. In eight chapters Bek signals the technology shifts from trains and tramways to buses, from buses to bicycles, and eventually from bicycles to cars. Every chapter describes a case of interaction between workers, employees and state in one of the regions of interest. But more importantly, he describes the various ways agents act with respect to mobility, being state intervention, paternalism by employers and the self-determination of the workers. Bek confronts us with an interesting aspect of work. Themes concerning working conditions, like safety in the workshop, working times and wages, or living conditions, like affordable housing and health care, are studied elaborately. Travelling to and from the workshop is an interesting addition which is not studied often.

A reason for this might be that sources are very dispersed and only small references to the subject can be found in unsuspected places of archival

fonds. Unfortunately for Bek, the recent opening of the archives of the Netherlands Trade Union Confederation (FNV) at the International Institute of Social History came too late for this research. This archive might contain more, and more structured, files on the subject. Nevertheless, Bek succeeded in finding enough sources in company archives, sometimes held by the companies themselves, and institutional archives, for instance accumulated by organisations of workers or cyclists. Only occasionally Bek refers to governmental material. And of course, modern historical scholarship is impossible without (digitized) periodicals.

Around 1900, workers mainly lived within walking distance from their work. As suburbs arose and workers moved there, this distance grew, and workers needed new means to travel to work. It was expected that railway connections, including the smaller and cheaper local rail- and tramways, would overcome the spatial living-working mismatch. Because railways failed to deliver at low costs and with good service, workers and their employers found alternatives using bicycles and buses. The use of buses was influenced by employers because they organised the transport, while on the other hand transport by bus was influenced by government with safety regulations. Bicycles imposed a danger on the users if they failed to use them safely or did not maintain them properly. This resulted in new traffic regulations by governments and employers trying to influence behaviour. So, workers had to deal with all kinds of external factors in their choice of transport while commuting.

Still, on a few occasions workers tried to take matters into their own hands. In Chapter 2, Bek describes an interesting case where workers at the State Mines protested the high bus fares – a consequence of new state regulations – by refusing to use the bus and collectively cycle to the mine. Some bus companies, on the verge of being bankrupt, were convinced to lower their fares. Collective action had come to the rescue. The following chapters describe the evolution of workers being more and more in control of their own home-work mobility. During a period of austerity in and after the Second World War, workers had to rely on their bicycles increasingly. They needed help from their employers for its maintenance because of the shortages. This form of transport was an important mode of travel, supplemented by mopeds and buses, until the rise of the self-owned car around 1970. Thanks to collectively bargained reimbursement of travel expenses, a period started when most workers were able to make their own choices on travelling to and from work.

The sources reveal that employers had an incentive to get their workmen at the workshop safe and on time. Sometimes they wanted to recruit new workmen so bad, that they offered to solve the burden of organising the travel for the newly recruited employees. In Chapter 6, Bek outlines the post-war situation where workers were travelling to work by bicycle *en masse*. Employers tried to discipline their workers to comply with regulations for

using a bicycle on the premise, manage maintenance and even try to control their behaviour in traffic outside the workplace. Control of traffic behaviour outside the workplace was done by stipulating that the lack of traffic rules and discipline resulted in a loss of national income, arguing that government should step in. Chapter 7 is concerned with migrant workers. Employers offer housing, combined with the organisation of the traveling. Here employers are in full control over the situation and the thin line between taking care of an employee like an overly concerned father and controlling an employee's life for his own benefit is neared. In both chapters Bek assesses the employers as 'paternalistic': they tried to control the behaviour of their employees both in and outside the workplace.

Bek concludes that workers themselves, employers, and the state had various distributions of power over the way workers travelled from and to work. In time, different circumstances, like the availability of technology, the income of the worker and cultural and political trends, determined the shift of control between the various actors. Power was almost never concentrated in one group.

Bek did a commendable job shedding light on an underexposed aspect of working life in the twentieth century. A thorough examination of new, less accessible material, with dispersed information as bits and pieces in the sources, made this possible. The study concentrates on a hidden, very implicit interaction and therefore unravels how deep systemic structures influence labour power relations. This is an important insight that can be applied to present work relations as well. The daily travelling to and from work feels like an insignificant part of life between work and household, but Bek shows convincingly otherwise. It gives rise to more studies of other historical periods and other places in the world.

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