

The Netherlands: Farmers' Revolt

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The shock among the Dutch chattering classes on 16 March was palpable. The right-populist Farmer-Citizen Movement (BBB) – established in 2019 by a small communications firm, bankrolled by the powerful Dutch agrifood complex and led by a former meat industry journalist – had massively increased its vote share in the country's provincial elections. It is now the largest party in all twelve provinces, and expected to achieve the same status in Senate elections next month. This would give BBB veto power at both national and local levels, potentially bringing an already hesitant green transition process to a standstill. Faced with this prospect, an irate commentariat has begun to denounce the farmers as enemies of environmental progress, and speculate that voting restrictions – on the elderly, the 'undereducated', those in rural constituencies – might be necessary to override their resistance.

The casus belli for the farmers' revolt was a 2019 ruling by the Dutch Supreme Court that the government had breached its EU obligations to protect 163 natural areas against emissions from nearby agricultural activities. This prompted the centre-right coalition government, led by Mark Rutte, to impose a nationwide speed limit on highways of 100km/h and cancel a wide array of building projects intended to alleviate supply shortages on the Dutch housing market. Yet it soon became apparent that such measures were insufficient, since transport and construction contributed a pittance to national nitrogen emissions. Agriculture, by contrast, was responsible for 46%. A structural solution would therefore have to involve substantial reduction of livestock. The suggestion long put forward by the marginal 'Party for the Animals', to slash half of the aggregate Dutch livestock by expropriating 500 to 600 major emitters, was suddenly on the table. The unthinkable had become thinkable.

The number of Dutch workers employed in agricultural activities has declined precipitously in the last century, from around 40% during the Great War to only 2% today. Yet, over the same period, the Netherlands has become the second biggest food exporter in the world after the US. Its meat and dairy industry plays a pivotal role in global supply chains, which makes its ecological footprint unsustainable large. Hence the gradual realization among the Dutch political class – accelerated by the Supreme Court ruling – that meeting climate goals meant reorienting the national economy. The level of enthusiasm for this project varied among the governing parties. For the rural-oriented Christian Democrats it was a hard pill to swallow; for the eco-modernist, meritocratic social liberals of Democrats 66 it was a golden opportunity; while for Rutte's People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD) it was simply the pragmatic option. As one MP remarked, 'The Netherlands can't be the country that feeds the world while at the same time shitting itself.'

The proposals triggered an unexpected wave of peasant protests – farmers blocking roads with their tractors, occupying squares and other public spaces, breaking into government buildings and turning up at the homes of politicians – as well as the formation of the BBB. After a brief pause during lockdown, this movement reached new heights of intensity. Since spring 2022, along the roads and highways leading into the forgotten parts of the Netherlands, farmers have hung thousands of inverted national flags: a symbol of their discontent.

Almost one fifth of the electorate, approximately 1.4 million people, turned out to vote for the BBB this month – a significantly larger number than the 180,000 farmers who comprise its core constituency. This suggests that more is at stake than simple nimbyism. Pensioners, the vocationally-trained and the precariously employed are overrepresented among the party's supporters, and its largest electoral gains were in peripheral, non-urban areas which have been hit hard by falling public investment. Such groups have rallied around a class of farmers who present themselves as victims, but who are in fact among the most privileged in the country: one in five is a millionaire. It's clear that this heterogeneous bloc could only be assembled as a result of deep disenchantment with mainstream Dutch politics – which has long been blighted by the arrogance and incompetence of its ruling stratum.

A number of historical factors helped to lay the groundwork for the farmers' movement. First, the Netherlands underwent an extremely rapid neoliberal makeover since the early 1980s, resulting in the fire sale of public services, the marketization of childcare, healthcare and higher education, a steep decline in social housing, the emergence of globalized banks and pension funds, and one of the most flexible labour markets in the EU, with a third of employees on precarious contracts. Next, the 2008 financial crisis led to one of the most expensive banking rescues in per capita terms, followed by six years of austerity which served to redistribute wealth from the poor to the rich. The four lockdowns imposed between 2020 and 2022 had the same effect: workers lost their jobs, saw their incomes fall and died in greater numbers. Rising consumer prices, sparked by the war in Ukraine, subsequently pushed many Dutch households into fuel poverty.

All this was interspersed with constant bureaucratic failures across a range of government departments: childcare, primary education, housing, the tax office, transport and gas extraction. At the same time, regressive subsidies were handed out to middle-class environmentalists to reimburse the costs of heat pumps, solar panels and Teslas. Add a constant trickle of high-handed insults about the lower classes from the putative experts who dominate public debate, and you end up with a combustible mixture of resentments. The situation was finally ignited in 2019 by the court ruling, at which point latent regional-cultural identities provided the raw symbolic material for the farmers' adversarial narrative: urban versus rural, elites versus masses, vegans versus meat-eaters. With the help of some savvy political entrepreneurs, this message began to resonate far beyond the farmlands.

The French novelist Michel Houellebecq once wrote that the Netherlands is not a country but a limited liability corporation. This perfectly captures the view of Rutte's VVD. Since it came to power in 2010, it has reimagined the Netherlands as a new Singapore on the Rhine – establishing a form of mercantilist neoliberalism geared towards attracting as much foreign capital, both financial and human, as possible. In its attempt to court foreign direct investment, the Netherlands has become one of the largest tax havens in the world. Its social security regime has been redesigned to serve highly educated expats, turning Amsterdam into an Anglophone outpost where one must speak English in order to visit a shop or a restaurant, while refugees and asylum seekers are locked away near some of the poorest villages in the Dutch outback. Public investment has predominantly flowed to metropolitan areas in the West, while largely surpassing the peripheries along the German border.

The dynamics of uneven development have been legitimated by a narrative that extols the virtues of the city and its 'creative class'. Geographers like Richard Florida and Edward Glazer popularized the notion that post-ideological politicians must stop backing losers and start picking winners by steering massive amounts of public funding to the urban centres – which were thought to hold the key to national economic success. And so it went: while hospitals, schools, fire stations and bus lines slowly disappeared from the periphery, the core was decked with glittering metro lines. Large differences in life expectancy opened up between these regions, as well as a major divergence in

people's trust for politicians.

Rutte, the premier that has overseen it all, is now set to become the longest sitting head of state since the Kingdom of the Netherlands was founded in 1815. He is adept at playing the game of politics, but he lacks the ideological vision necessary to weather times of crisis. (Rutte has famously said that voters who want vision should go to an optometrist.) Demography, balanced budgets, the euro, Covid-19, war, climate change: these are the imponderabilia that Rutte and his ilk, backed by their battery of experts, have used to discipline Dutch voters into submission. Nitrogen emissions form part of this broader pattern. The plan to halve livestock numbers was not drawn up after a lengthy process of democratic debate; it was a snap judgment made by politicians hiding behind an unaccountable judiciary. But, this time, the government was caught off-guard by the backlash it provoked.

It may therefore be necessary to revise the German poet Heinrich Heine's observation that 'In Holland, everything happens fifty years late'. Here, it seems, the revolt against technocracy has come early. The Dutch conjuncture likely foreshadows the fate of other rich countries in the Global North – as centrist governments, striving to assert their green credentials, begin to make heavy-handed policy reforms with major redistributive consequences.

What Andreas Malm calls the 'energetic regime' of global capitalism has so far taken up most of our political attention; but as the environmental fallout of its 'caloric regime' becomes unignorable, livestock farming will enter the crosshairs of governments and climate activists. Recent data from Eurostat show that livestock densities are particularly high in Denmark, Flanders, Piemonte, Galicia, Brittany, Southern Ireland and Catalonia. Soon enough, these regions will have to introduce measures similar to those currently under discussion in the Netherlands. And if the Dutch example is anything to go by, technocracy will hardly do the trick. A state that has imposed privatization, flexibilization, austerity, disinvestment and regressive environmental subsidies on its citizens cannot expect to be trusted when it comes to climate politics. Instead, it will have to redress the effects of these ruinous policies while gradually building support for a green transition through a process of meaningful engagement – one that does not shy away from democratic disagreement, nor the difficult work it entails.

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P.S.

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