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# The Making of Regressive Rural Populism in The Netherlands

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***Disclaimer:***

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If all the world is a commodity, how poor we grow. When all the world is a gift in motion, how wealthy we become.

— Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*

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## List of Acronyms

BBB	Boer Burger Beweging
CDA	Christen Democratisch Appel
CSA	Community Supported Agriculture
CBS	Centraal Bureau voor Statistiek
FDF	Farmers Defence Force
LTO	Land- en Tuinbouw Organisatie
LVC	La Via Campesina
NAV	Nederlandse Akkerbouw Vakbond
NOS	Nederlandse Omroep Stichting
NVV	Nederlandse Vakbond Varkenshouders
PCP	Petty Commodity Producer
POS	Political Opportunity Structure
WUR	Wageningen University & Research

## **Abstract**

This research aims to unpack the underlying reasons for the populist farmers' protests and the 2023 electoral win of the right-wing farmers' party (BBB) in The Netherlands by asking how and with what outcome the interactions among farmers, agro-industry, and electoral politics have shaped a protest coalition in response to the government's nitrogen reduction proposals. It does so by focusing on the mechanisms behind the making of regressive rural populism to explain how farmers call for reproduction of an industrial agricultural system that simultaneously causes environmental and climate degradation and further exploitation of the farmer. Through ethnographic research with farmers across The Netherlands this paper argues that decades of rural abandonment, transformation of the countryside by industrial agriculture, and social differentiation of the farmer have created fertile breeding ground for rural populism. The influence of the agro-industry in media, research, education, and the reinforcement of the farmer as both the steward of the countryside and a successful entrepreneur, upholds the intertwining of agro-industry with farmers. The upholding of cultural hegemony aided by the agro-industry results in the disregarding of the differences among most farmers in favor of a unified protest coalition. In the end, the Dutch case shows not only the effects of a right-wing rural populist coalition shaped by the role of agro-capital, but the risk of what happens when farmers are weaponized against sustainable food-system transitions by those actors which benefit mostly from the current system. As a conclusion this research presents buildings blocks to untangle the complicated marriage between farmer and agro-industry using the framework of food sovereignty.

## **Relevance to development studies**

Research into the impacts of capitalist development on agriculture, food and environment is at the core of Agrarian, Food and Environmental Studies (AFES) and fits within the larger paradigm of critical agrarian studies. A current interest among scholars is the rise of right-wing rural populism across the world, in the face of the unfolding capitalist crisis. This research aims to contribute to, and expand upon, this literature by focusing on the making of agrarian rural populism in the context of The Netherlands.

## **Keywords**

Rural populism, agrarian populism, right wing politics, class consciousness, global industrial food system, agro-industry, power relations.



# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Research Puzzle & Problem

The Netherlands counts roughly 52.000 farms, providing jobs for about 2,1% of the working population in a country with 17.5 million inhabitants (CBS, 2023a). Yet, while the people involved in food production make up a small percentage of society, the March 2023 provincial elections resulted in a surprising outcome: the BoerBurgerBeweging or farmer citizens movement (BBB) emerged victorious, becoming the largest party in all twelve provinces, and going from zero to sixteen seats in the senate (de Joode & Mouissie, 2023). The BBB was founded in reaction to the Dutch farmers' cycle of protests, giving electoral representation to a regressive populist coalition with a multi-class base.

The protest cycle is marked by right-wing populism for neither the protests nor the electoral party provided “a transparent analysis of the problems that needed to be addressed” or presented an alternative to the problem, but rather drew on sentiments of neglect and grievance, mobilizing the feeling of “being subjected to unjustified views and actions of others” (Van der Ploeg, 2020, p. 598). Following the demands and nature of the farmers' protests, the BBB ran its campaign on what is labelled as “common sense for a healthy countryside” by focusing on the preservation and development of the countryside and the “importance of the role of the farmer, fisher, and hunter”, with, purportedly, at its core “the right of the farmer to exist” (BBB, 2020, p.1). In addition, the political strategy of the BBB as a newcomer was to make use of their ‘outsider’ position, the party was primarily founded as a reaction against government policy, a ‘protest-party’. In this way the party was able to mobilize a larger electorate which had been unsatisfied with the current government for a longer period. Fuelled by prior governance crises such as the childcare benefits scandal and the effects of decades of gas extraction in the northern province, the BBB attracted not only voters from rural areas, such as farmers and their sympathizers, but also people from urban areas (NOS, 2023a).<sup>1 2 3</sup>

The emergence of the Dutch farmers' protests in a regressive rural coalition is part of a larger global phenomenon, where similar rural networks and coalitions are growing in various countries in times of climate- and capitalist crisis (i.e., Borrás 2020; Scoones et al. 2018; Mamonova et al., 2020). This includes the rural support for Brexit, the rise of far-right populism in Sweden and their campaign for property rights and exclusion in rural contexts, and the anti-refugee and nationalist agricultural discourse in Italy (Brooks, 2019; Ferrari, 2020; Iocco et al., 2020). These developments starkly contrast with the primarily urban-based movements, which seems to

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<sup>1</sup> Childcare benefits scandal: Over 20.000 families were wrongfully accused of fraudulently claiming childcare benefits by the Dutch tax authorities (Henley, 2021).

<sup>2</sup> Gas extraction Groningen: The 60 years of gas extraction in the province of Groningen have caused earthquakes and damages to houses and infrastructure resulting in a national crisis. Despite promises, aid and recovery for the region are still insufficient and little despite the Dutch government making billions over the extracted fossil fuels (Nationale Ombudsman, 2021).

<sup>3</sup> Ipsos research from March 2023 shows that the BBB scored well in both countryside and urban areas, with one-third of the votes originating from rural areas. Only 17% of BBB voters indicated that they have a lot of confidence in national politics, compared to 43% national average. 3/4<sup>th</sup> of the voters indicated they voted BBB as a ‘protest vote’ against the then current government. The nitrogen policies were the main reason for voting BBB among 92% of voters, next to ‘other climate policies’, immigration, and integration (NOS, 2023a).

dominate (electoral) politics and debates concerning topics such as climate justice. However, these surges of regressive populism show that while the voting power of thinly populated rural areas is perceived as insignificant in absolute numerical terms, they have been repeatedly politically crucial, at times as ‘swing votes’ - such as with Trump’s and the Republican party victory in 2016 - or in support of far-right party leaders in presidential elections - such as with Marine Le Pen in 2016 (Mamonova et al., 2020).

Between 2019 and 2022, tens of thousands of farmers took to the streets to protest the governments’ response to the so-called nitrogen crisis. The EU demanded, and the Dutch constitutional court concurred, that the Netherlands could no longer ignore the biodiversity loss resulting from excess emissions of nitrogen oxides and ammonia (van der Ploeg, 2020, 2022). The main sources of Dutch nitrogen emissions are livestock manure and chemical fertilisers, sparking debates within the government on reduction of livestock numbers (Engelen, 2023). These discussions were met with the largest farmers’ protests in Dutch history. Vandana Shiva, well-known scientist, agrarian and feminist activist, claimed the following about the protests:

The dominant system wants to take the food future to a place where there’s farming without farmers and food without farms. That was what the Dutch issue was all about. So just like Extinction Rebellion is trying to resist the extinction, the farmers’ resistance is resisting the extinction of farmers. (Unherd Staff, 2023, para. 3)

While this sketches a narrative of farmers versus big government and industry, these distinctions are far more complex. Such claims are only partial truths, meaning partially wrong. Key starting assumptions in my study are: (a) the ‘farmer’s sector’ is not a unified, homogenous group, (b) the so-called farmers’ protest are not just ‘farmers’ but also include agro-industry capital, and (c) the farmers’ protests did not represent all farmers and farmers’ groups in the Netherlands, nor did it represent all types of farmers equally.

The highly industrialized, capital-intensive agriculture which dominates the food system in the Netherlands, has created a farmer – regardless of socioeconomic standing – which is dependent on, upheld by, and intertwined with the owners of big capital in agro-industry on an economic and social level. This same agro-industry mobilizes on an anti-establishment sentiment which has been gaining momentum in both cities and the countryside. The agro-industry is strongly connected to both the rural population (especially employed in agriculture) as well as the government through, for example, lobbying groups and political parties. Where scholars on rural populism engage with the dynamics of right-wing big politics and rural movements and voting blocs (see for example Mamonova & Franquesa, 2020; Mamonova et al., 2020; Scoones et al., 2018), they tend to not give the appropriate weight to (agro-)industrial capitalists in the rise of rural populism.

The Dutch farmers’ protests and consequential win of the BBB is an iconic example that a regressive rural populist coalition can and will have far-reaching impacts on national politics and the future trajectory of an industrialized country facing the crises of capitalism (as described by Borras, 2020). At the same time, the protests must be contextualized by decades of change and uncertainty shaped by government policy and neoliberal forces. If the protests have the plight of the farmer at heart, it seems perhaps contradictory, then, that very few (if any) of the protests made a link to the historical and ongoing decline in the number of farmers: from 410.000 in 1950 to around 100.000 at the turn of the century, to half that 20 years later – not due to any environmental concerns, but purely by the government-assisted ‘invisible hand of the market’ (Saat, 2023). While enormous numbers of farmers lost their livelihoods, the profits of the agricultural industry soared: the production value is tenfold compared to 1950 (CBS, 2023b). Although the Netherlands makes up only 0.04 % of the global available agricultural land, it has become the second largest exporter of agricultural goods worldwide (Grinsven & Kooman, 2017). It is no surprise, then, that the industry played a very significant role in encouraging the ongoing centralization of agriculture,

increasing the dependency of the ‘leftover farmers’ on their (often environmentally harmful) chemicals, machines, and loans (Saat, 2023). Compared to this historic decline driven by the agro-industry, the government’s plan to buy out several of the most environmentally harmful farms pales in comparison. Yet when it came to protesting the government’s policies, not only was this history overlooked: but the protesters chose to ally with the agro-industry, relying on them for their funding for the protest activities, either in the form of gifts or as sponsorships (Leijten & Boogaard, 2023).

This interweaving of populist revolt against changing dynamics in rural settings is often a reaction to capitalist projects, especially their neoliberal development variants. This is visible in for example Turkey and Italy, where populist right-wing parties with a large rural base have made electoral gains or hold office. However, rather than presenting a clear anti-capitalist vision, these waves of protest reinforce capitalist powers and systems (Adaman et al., 2018; Iocco, 2020; Karataşlı & Kumral, 2023). The emergence of a regressive populist rural coalition with strong focus on protecting and upholding of the current farming system, a denial of scientific data, and focus on innovation and economic solutions, and above all the intensification of the neoliberal project, strongly contrasts with the need for a radical transition of the industrial food system towards an equal and just future.

These contradictions bring forward several interrelated questions. Firstly, considering the corporate involvement in the protests, how should the participation of different types of farmers be understood? If we take the claim at face value that these protests are solely by and about farmers, then we become blinded to the key role played by industrial capital in agro-business and thereby suffer the fundamental problem described by Shiva. On the other hand, framing the upheaval as just an extension of the agro-industry does nothing to explain the reasons for different types of farmers to join, support, and identify with the protests, and inadvertently dismisses the political agency of farmers who joined the protests. So, what motivates socially differentiated farmers and different classes to, or to not, support the protests? If we do not address the different motivations, the protests will likely be interpreted as solely originating in response to the nitrogen crisis rather than larger systemic issues which have transformed the countryside over the past decades.

Lastly, it brings forward the question of where, among this entangled web of actors, is the potential for a counter-hegemonic struggle? What are the obstacles and opportunities for a progressive coalition to emerge out of the current right-wing, populist landscape? By ‘counter-hegemonic’ and ‘progressive’ we refer to movements such as La Via Campesina (LVC) who struggle against the capitalist system and its grip on agriculture, choosing instead to fight for food sovereignty.<sup>4</sup> If we only analyse the regressive populist movement, potential building blocks for alternative pathways out of the current deadlock which tackle the structural problems of inequality and exploitation, will be overlooked. Conversely, without analysing the current landscape and understanding the emergence of the regressive rural coalition a progressive alternative might not be able to fully counter, break and overcome the power and influence of such a coalition.

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<sup>4</sup> Examples in The Netherlands are coalitions such as the Agroecology Network, VoedselAnders, the Federation of Agroecological Farmers and its member organizations, including LVC-member Toekomstboeren.

## 1.2 Research Question

Main question:

How have farmers, agro-industry and right-wing politics shaped one another and constructed a protest coalition in response to the government's nitrogen crisis policies?

Sub-questions:

Why and how have socially differentiated farmers and the agro-industry managed to forge a protest coalition?

How does political culture influence the class politics among farmers and agro-industry, and between farmers and the government?

What role did regressive rural populism play in the protest cycle, and what were the political outcomes of the farmers' protest?

## 1.3 Research Objectives

The literature on contemporary populism offers important insights to understand the Dutch phenomenon, but often focuses on the relation of the farmer versus capital, the peasant versus the big capitalist. This research aims to engage with and add onto the current work on regressive rural populism by focusing on the alliance between agro-industry, electoral politics, and farmers in the Netherlands. The Netherlands provides a case where the degree of success of such an alliance has not yet been explored. This research sets out to both understand the circumstances which gave rise to the Dutch rural populist coalition and identify the building blocks needed to construct a possible pathway out of the current deadlock the farmers' protests have created. It is crucial for the future of Dutch agriculture – and in extension that of any highly industrialised, capitalist food system - to understand the dynamics at play between capital, rural populations, and (electoral) politics. In doing so, any future developments, especially in light of rapidly intensifying climate change, the pressure on nature and biodiversity, and at large the unfolding capitalist crisis can be navigated. This is especially relevant in the current period of corporate control and concentration which cause increasing concerns about the impact of the agro-industry on “equity, human rights and the environment, and political control” (Clapp & Puruggannan, 2020, p.1268). Understanding the role of agriculture and food producers in populist, right-wing rural and urban-based protest cycles and coalitions is important in defining a future trajectory of our political and social climate.

This paper departs from the framework set by van der Ploeg (2020) who identifies the early start of the farmers' protests and highlights the dynamics between the rural/urban divide, environmentalism, and neoliberal developments within agriculture and the tension which arose. This work expands on the analysis of the regressive populism with a multi-class base, where “large, entrepreneurial farmers, peasant-like farmers, farm workers, different agribusiness groups, contract workers and other rural dwellers gathered together without any real attempt to mediate their differing interests”, providing a stepping stone to his call for “an urgent need to develop an agroecological proposal that builds on, and unites, the many ‘pockets’ of peasant agriculture and that, at the same time, deals in an integrated way with the socio-economic and environmental problems of an industrial agricultural model that is no longer fit for purpose” (ibid., pp. 598, 603).

## 1.4 Methodology

The qualitative methodology chosen for this research applied both inductive and deductive approaches to gather empirical data on the farmers' protests in the Netherlands. This was done through ethnographic research as presented by Schensul et al. (1999) consisting of interviews and conversations as well as participant observation. The choice for ethnographic research was based upon the need to discover how people construct meaning and beliefs in relation to their actions and choices, so rather than to write about and talk to, to learn from and work with farmers. The aim was to not only fully understand their perception of the farmers' protests, but to go beyond this and understand how the struggles in their daily lives on their own farms have shaped their interpretation of the world. From these observations and inquiries, my data was gathered and used to carefully construct and reconstruct arguments and theory.

This research is a case study of the Dutch farmers' protests, but in doing so follows the inquiries posed by Lund (2014) and Burawoy (1998). Building upon Lund's (2014) analytical matrix, this study navigates between *specific* and *concrete* data (e.g., agrarian transformations in the Netherlands, agro-industrial capital, potent cycles) identifies *general* patterns, and links these to *abstract* theories (e.g., populism, cultural hegemony, the crises of capitalism, the making of a counter-hegemonic struggle). By interweaving these different dimensions this study aims to expand its relevance and resonance beyond 'the Dutch case'. In line with the proposal of Burawoy (1998) on the extended case study this research continuously contextualizes data, connects local findings to general theories, frames observations within preexisting theory and contextualizes it with (historical) analysis. This further complements the scholar activism at the heart of this research (see section 1.4.1).

The research consisted of three different phases. Firstly, I explored existing literature on rural populism, focusing on but not limited to regressive and Global North based movements and political parties, as well as literature on the Dutch farmers' protests and agricultural context. With this literature as a basis, I was able to construct a formative theory which acted as the foundation for preparing my interviews with participants. The second part of my research consisted of field work where I interviewed twenty participants, either farmers or farmer representatives, across the country. Finally, the collected data was processed and interwoven with theory, and arguments were constructed from this. This process was one of continuous return to literature and data, of rewriting and rethinking arguments and trying to fill in the gaps that kept emerging often through more informal conversations with other scholars, activists, and farmers. In the end, the emerging arguments also give rise to questions and inquiries on their own, which go beyond the scope of this paper (see CH 5).

### 1.4.1 Scholar Activism

This research is composed, conducted, and constructed with scholar-activism at its core. Borras and Franco (2023) write about scholar-activism that “its intellectual, political, and moral compass is the social justice struggle for a world that is more just, fairer, and kinder. It necessarily takes a bias in favour of the exploited and oppressed classes and social groups” (p.1). The authors continue to write that agrarian scholar activism specifically concerns itself with ‘agrarian struggles’ and “the way that political power is generated, contested and transformed around property relations, labour regimes, income distribution, profit appropriation, and social reproduction” (ibid., p. 5).

The point of departure is the question posed by Gramsci (1971): “Are intellectuals an autonomous and independent social group, or does every social group have its own particular specialized category of intellectuals?” (p. 3). Specifically of interest is the concept of organic agrarian intellectuals, who function “in directing the ideas and aspirations of the class to which they

organically belong” (ibid, p.1). I position myself as an ‘agrarian intellectual’, as defined by Jess Gilbert (2015) who writes about those ‘organic intellectuals’ who came from the Midwestern family-farming class and “never forgot – indeed, worked primarily for – the interest of those farm people” (p. 7). Throughout this research I aim to do the same as I navigate between the position of a scholar activist within the academic world, a farmer within the agrarian world, and as an activist divided between both.

My position as an academic provides me with the ability to undertake rigorous and critical research with the guidance of frameworks and scholars far more knowledgeable than me. My roots in the family farm and my involvement and work in the food system means I can bring in perspectives and experiences from a practical reality. It allows me to bring theory into the fields, to create a better understanding as I engage with peoples’ lived realities. My position greatly shapes my understanding and approach to Dutch agriculture, having grown up on a biodynamic farm, located between city and countryside. It is this engagement with agricultural reality which led me to become active in various agrarian movements such as LVC, the agroecology movement and the Dutch climate movement. The realization that my family’s farm is an exception, while it provides so many answers to the current crises, is the starting point of my research. The struggles and fight for a just food system fuelled, shaped, and informed the inquiries at the core of this work, by providing me with the motivation to push through in the moments where the puzzle seemed too complex and grand.

Throughout the process of gathering data, my position as a woman, an activist and a farmer has been central to my engagement with participants, presenting both a challenge and an opportunity. My familiarity with agriculture, with the reality of different farmers and the current social and political context allowed for an in-depth engagement and established a base level of understanding with (and willingness to participate from) farmers which other academics might not have. Conversely, this posed the risk of letting go of my impartiality and objectivity, especially when the conversations steered towards my personal views on and experiences with farming. Throughout the data collection process, I aimed to be aware of this dynamic and, when possible, to ensure a clear separation between my field research and my personal inquiries.

At the same time, two farmers were at first reluctant to partake in my research upon hearing about my background in organic farming and/or activism. I therefore clearly stated that my point of departure was that of academic research: my integrity as a researcher would ensure their anonymity, and the interviews would be conducted from a genuine willingness to learn. To avoid the conversation going awry due to the heightened emotional, political, and ideological tensions, however, keeping in mind my position as a young woman in a male-dominated environment, the conversations were deliberately focused on the personal experiences of farmers and their farms’ future, rather than (taking the initiative for) expanding onto overtly political views. On the one hand, this ensured that farmers would not go into the defensive, possibly skewing their answers; on the other hand, the data set might have missed some depth on certain points for this reason. I was also unable to address the role of gender in farming communities and in the protest movement, although this could have provided valuable (and interesting) insights.

#### **1.4.2 Data collection**

Sampling was conducted both systemically, by reaching out to specific farmers who were involved in farmer representation in unions and organizations or had been specifically vocal and visible during the protests as well as through snowballing, whereby participants asked neighbours or others in their social circles to partake in my research. These methods were chosen for they provided me with the ability to reach a diverse group of farmers who also met the criteria I set within this research, within the given time frame.

The field research was undertaken between the 19<sup>th</sup> of July and the 23<sup>rd</sup> of August by conducting semi-structured interviews and conversations with different farmers, on location with exception of three farmers who were only available for an interview via telephone. The choice to meet in person and visit the different farms allowed me to create a better understanding of the context such as the locality and social circumstances of the different farmers. In choosing the interviewees, several characteristics were kept in mind (see appendix B). In addition, an attempt was made to select farmers from different localities such as types of environments, approximate distance to larger urban areas, but due to time constraint and the difficulty I encountered in reaching out to possible interviewees, this was not continuously possible.

The heightened tensions around the farmers' protests, ranging from judgement by colleagues to (physical) intimidation, and the perceived reluctance by farmers to engage with media about the issues linked to the nitrogen crises, made me considerate of my position and the ways I could engage with the topic. In my field research I aimed to be as open and observant as possible by constructing the interviews about the personal experiences and views of the individual farmers I engaged with rather than centring questions about larger systemic reflections on the current and future position on Dutch agriculture (see appendix A for the interview guidelines). In addition, interviews with representatives of various farmers organizations allowed me to sketch a broader image by inquiring about the perceived motivations and demands of their members. Each participant was asked for consent prior to the start of the interview and to ensure the conversations were comfortable and open, no recordings were made. All results have been anonymized. All quotes from participants in this research are indirect, reflecting the fact that notes were handwritten and thereafter translated from Dutch to English, marked in italics and cited as personal communication (pc).

The collected data consists of field notes taken during the interviews and audio recordings of my own personal impressions and observations shortly post-interview to ensure that my data processing at a later stage would be as complete as possible. The data analysis included the highlighting re-occurring themes and topics across the various participants as well as observations and answers which strongly corresponded or contrasted with existing literature. An overview of main characteristics and a typology based on the twenty participants was created (see appendix C). Through conversations with various scholars such as Van der Ploeg, I have pieced together a puzzle consisting of the collected data, observations made throughout the years of work experience within activism and farming, and an analysis of common- and media discourse on agriculture and the farmers' protests. This includes analysis of speeches and interviews on common themes and use of specific words. To ensure that my findings, observations, and tentative conclusions and suggestions were broadly recognized and supported, my observations were compared and connected with those made by others, including researchers, farmers, and agrarian activists.

## 2 Theoretical Framework

This research is firmly rooted within the field of critical agrarian studies, which “is critical in three ways: it interrogates mainstream neoliberal theories; it is sympathetic to radical social movements and their proposed alternatives but is vigilant in scrutinizing these in theory and practice; and it questions, and works to transform, the very institutions of the global circuits of knowledge” (Borras, 2023b, p. 449). Throughout this research different concepts and theories are used which serve as tools to understand and contextualize the Dutch case of farmers’ protests within a broader framework of critical agrarian studies.

### 2.1 Agriculture & Class dynamics

In this research, the term farmer is used to refer to people who own and work on their farm. We will briefly touch upon some concepts to express the differences among farmers, shaped through their class relations, not because class analysis is simple and can be fully understood within a paragraph, but because these terms serve as an illustration to better explain the context of the Dutch current farmers’ protests. The work of Edelman (2013), Wright (1984; 2005) and Mooney (1983) provide the framework to do so through the concepts peasant, petty commodity producer (PCP), wage labourer, and capitalists.

Within the context of a highly industrialized country that is the Netherlands, the usage of the word peasant refers to societies mostly dominated by small-scale family farmers where the forces of capitalism have not yet (fully) penetrated the countryside and shaped the economic relations (Edelman, 2013). The peasantry within a capitalist setting has not disappeared in its entirety, rather it has transformed into ‘peasant-like’ farmers, as defined by van der Ploeg (2018), or farmers who express a degree of the “peasant condition” (p. 46). This includes for example reducing dependency on non-monetary ways of obtaining labour, diversification of crops, and production in such a manner that economic and environmental risks are reduced.

The PCP has ownership over the means of production and the products of the production process, which they sell on the market as commodities, but does not employ wage-labour (Harris-White, 2023). Family farms that produce for the market through self-exploitation are a good example in the context of the Netherlands. The process of proletarianization has given rise to the wage labourer (the proletariat) and capitalists. This class distinction is built upon the different exploitative relations that are created, where the worker is exploited in the labour processes as the surplus value is appropriated by the capitalists (Wright, 1984).

Central to this research is the agro-industry which is to be understood as the part of the global food system outside of the farm. In the Dutch context I define the agro-industry as companies which provide the inputs for farmers – ranging from chemicals and machinery to pharmaceuticals and hybrid seeds, those which have an advisory role related to the future endeavours and expansions of the farmer, and the banks which provide the monetary means through loans and credit, as well as those companies that manage the export, processing, and retail of products. The definition of ‘agro industrial’ provided by McMichael (2013) is an “economic sector integrated into industrial complexes, producing foods for large processors and traders with agro-inputs (hybrid seeds, chemicals, machinery) along monocultural lines” (p. 159). This research goes beyond this definition by focusing on the entanglement of the farmer with the agro-industry. To define this distinction, a starting point is the difference in the power and influence of most individual farmers compared to large agro-companies. The increased corporate concentration in the agricultural sector has far reaching impacts on the dominant agricultural model and the ability



for governance to regulate and monitor (Clapp, 2018). These dynamics occur on a national and global level, far beyond the influence of the farmer.

Analysing the relations among farmers and understanding the differences that have emerged as well as the social and economic tensions requires a deeper understanding of the concept of class, as relational and historical, specifically in an agrarian setting. Thompson (1968) notes that “the class experience is largely determined by the productive relations into which [humans] are born – or enter involuntarily” (p.9). To understand how class operates, the work by Wright is key. Class agency, the ways in which social class relations can be transformed and reproduced, provides us with two important concepts within the scope of this research that allow for a better analysis of protest and the understanding of coalition making and movement building. Firstly, there is the notion of class consciousness which is the “subjective awareness people have of their class interests and the conditions for advancing them” and secondly class struggle, defined as “conflicts between the practices of individuals and collectivities in pursuit of opposing class interests” (Wright, 2005, pp. 20-21). Both terms are relevant to understand the emergence of protest and tension between classes and groups and potential for counter-hegemonic struggles.

## **2.2 Culture & Ideology**

Class agency is shaped and informed by culture, which within this research, is important to understand and explain the formation of a multi-class coalition of farmers and agro-industry and the implications on the power relations behind this coalition. Hall’s theory on culture and ideology offers a starting point to analyse the way in which class and culture interact. Defining culture as “the struggle over meaning (...) the particular pattern of relations established through the social use of things and techniques”, where meaning is constantly produced and “already interpreted social practices can be articulated into even larger relations of dominance and resistance” (Grossberg, 1986, p. 66). The meaning and political inflection of for example a particular media practice, technology, or social relationship is not set. Specific ideologies are not intrinsically tied to practices or a political position or social identity but rather must be “articulated into it” (ibid.). There is no fixed meaning until it has been represented, which can be done through different actors or agents, such as for example the media or educational institutes. By taking Hall’s definition of culture, it is not assumed to be a natural, organic given but rather constitutes a process of making and unmaking. This allows for an analysis into the how the meaning making process is shaped and refined.

Understanding how certain meanings and understandings can become dominant and fix meaning for certain people, groups, and classes, the work by Gramsci is fundamental. Coining the notion of cultural hegemony – a system of class rule - should be understood as the dominance of a particular group, power, or ideology which can be actively reinforced by people’s self-interest or through the control of people’s systems of values (Ramos, 1982). This is reinforced and strengthened by organic ideology, where ideological elements are arranged in an organic matter to form a unified system. The construction of an organic ideology is achieved through a variety of mechanisms, such as the media (see section 4.2.1).

## **2.3 Populism**

Populist protests in the Netherlands are an expression of and mechanism which gives visibility to the position of farmers, gives expression to their world view and understanding of reality, and a real-life example where the power and role of the agro-industry becomes clearly visible - more than it does on a daily basis. In this research I will use the definitions provided by Panizza (2005), Taggart (2000), and Borrás (2020). The first two authors write extensively about populism, it’s emergence

and configuration, while Borras provides some definitions to understand its many shapes and degrees (rural, right-wing, left-wing) better. Pattenden (2023) identifies populism, in a broad sense, “as a political strategy for obtaining or maintaining power”, which is combined with ‘the people as a political actor’ (p.15; Panizza, 2005, p.3) and a creation of an antagonist relation of ‘us vs them’ which can take on various forms such as the people vs the elite. Populism is not just a movement, leader, regime, or idea but often a combination and becomes of interest to scholars when this populism is mobilized (Taggart, 2000). Conditions for the emergence of populism are a plurality of demands in moments of crises or unrest without the ability of the institutional system to absorb or meet them (Panizza, 2005). Borras (2020) stresses the relational nature of populism, emphasizing that “it tends to be a means towards an end rather than an end itself, giving it a very generic character that is open-ended and flexible, facilitating easy adaptation by various ideological camps, even competing ones” (p.3).

This paper analyses two types of populism within the Dutch context: right-wing populism and rural populism. It is important to note that there is nothing inherently regressive or progressive about populism nor about rural populations per se (see section 3.3). However, in the Dutch case it has developed into rural, right-wing populism. Right-wing populism is “a regressive, conservative, or reactionary type of populism that promotes or defends capitalism in the name of ‘the people’” (Borras, 2020, p. 3). Agrarian populism should be understood as a homogenized category where various groups and class interests which are rural-based or rural-oriented are bundled together under a political project (ibid.). Building on the key literature, this research explores a set of conceptual handles through which cultural, social, and economic dynamics at the root of right-wing rural populism can be better analysed. While some inspiring studies (e.g., Edelman 2020) engage with the rural areas in the USA, parallels can be drawn with the situation in the Netherlands, such as the systematic undermining of relevant farming institutions by neoliberalism and the far-reaching effects this has on the countryside. To compare the Dutch case, the many contributions in Scoones et al. (2018) provides insightful analysis and examples of right-wing rural populism, especially across the Global North. Specifically, to understand the relations between rural populism, right wing parties, and national government, which this paper expands further on.

Besides rural populism, the phenomenon of the rural and rural-urban continuum is at the core of this research, both as a theoretical concept and its contextualization within the Dutch context. Understanding the rural and urban as in relation to and with each other rather than isolated environments is essential. Because The Netherlands is a small and densely populated country, the rural conditions as described by Edelman (2021) or Taggart (2000) within the context of the US as the ‘abandoned’ heartland with a romanticized notion of farmers as productive and dutiful citizens while simultaneously living in places of abandonment and sacrifice zones, is less applicable. While the same processes occur within the Netherlands, mainly those of rural decline and the associated stress that comes along with this due to capital undermining of institutions and social services, the relation of rural zones to the urban is different. The distances are far shorter and the rural is subjected to rapidly expanding urban areas while simultaneously rural villages continue to experience a decline of inhabitants (Milikowski, 2022). The differences between regions are large and unequal, or as Milikowski notes ‘the flat polder has changed into a mosaic of winners and losers’ (ibid, p. 9). The development and wealth in one region are directly tied to the decline of another. The work by Raymond Williams (1973) shows how the concepts and images of the urban and rural are actively constructed and upheld by the people who live in these spaces. The rural and urban do not only refer to physical spaces but also mental images which aid the idealization and romanticization of the perceived role and function of the rural in relation to the urban.

## 2.4 Social Movement Theory

Lastly, the research engages with various topics in relation to social movements. Literature on social movements provides valuable insights into the mechanisms behind the emergence of the Dutch protests and farmers coalition in the moment it did and the making of collective identities (Edelman, 2001). The term coalition is used to refer to the different actors, such as the agro-industry and farmer organizations, who cooperated around the farmers' protests and mobilized a multi-class base, with a right-wing agenda and narrative. For Fox (2010) it refers to "partnerships among distinct actors that coordinate action in pursuit of shared goal, which are different from networks and movements" (p. 486). Distinguishing between movements, networks and coalitions helps clarifying the power imbalances and political differences within. Coalition indicates a sense of joint action, as for example the case with the organized farmers' protests, while networks have a lower degree of coordination. Movements imply, on the other hand, a high degree of a shared collective identity, as well as horizontal exchange among participants. In the structure of the farmer's protests, fragmentation in representation and a lack of coherent demands and a shared unified vision did not result in the creation of a distinctive movement (ibid.).

To better understand why the protests and the right-wing coalition emerged when they did, the phenomenon of the protest cycle and the concept of 'political opportunity structure' (POS), as developed by Tarrow and others, serve as a useful framework for this research. Protest cycle refers to "at time period of heightened activity typically involving more than one movement" (Edelman, 2001, p. 296). Political opportunity theory argues that POS are the primary reason why social movements fail or succeed. If there is vulnerability in the existing political power or system, actors and movements can act on those and pursue social change, often operating along the same cyclical rise and fall of social movement activity (Tarrow, 2012). The concept 'collective action frames' is used to explain the construction of beliefs and meanings behind the protests and actions to legitimate the activities and campaigns that originated throughout and from the farmers' protests (Benford & Snow, 2000). It refers to the bridging of the "social psychological and structural/organizational considerations on movement participation" (Snow et al., 1986, p. 481).

In a thesis on a regressive populist movement, it would be remiss not to pay attention to the topic of a progressive alternative, a counter-hegemonic struggle. Research on related definitions and the construction of such a struggle is vast (see Borrás 2020; 2023a, Pattenden 2023). I define it as a struggle for food sovereignty because it challenges "the corporate dominated, market driven model of globalised food production and distribution", and because it offers a new model to fight hunger and poverty by developing and strengthening local communities (LVC, 1996). Food sovereignty "is the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems" (Nyéléni, 2007, p.1). As we will see in the following expansion on agriculture and farmers, such sovereignty is currently hard to find on Dutch soil.

## 3 Rural Politics and Economics in The Netherlands

### 3.1 About the Farmers' Protests

*“If you don't like farmers, don't eat” (dairy farmer, pc, 2023).*

In response to the government policies introduced in light of the nitrogen crisis, on the 1<sup>st</sup> of October 2019, thousands of farmers made their way to The Hague by tractor in large columns, disrupting highways and traffic throughout the country. The protest, organized by action groups Agractie and Farmers Defence Force (FDF), were met with broad support from other farming organizations, right-wing political parties, and agro-industrial companies.

The protests received extensive media coverage and were initially met with broad public support. An early poll conducted among broader Dutch society by EenVandaag showed that 89% of Dutch citizens were sympathetic and supportive of the protests (Cornelisse, 2020). Over time, the display of a red handkerchief became a symbol of support for the protesting farmers, often accompanied by upside-down Dutch flags and the slogan ‘Proud of the farmer’. In the months that followed more protests took place including highway blockades, a protest at the Dutch Broadcasting Foundation (NOS), and a protest at the national institute for health and the environment.<sup>5</sup> The protests also involved several visits to parliamentarians’ homes and attempts to storm government buildings including one instance that involved a tractor ramming the front doors (van der Ploeg 2020, 2022; Engelen, 2023).

The protest addressed a larger sentiment, one of an abandoned and forgotten countryside that was merely collateral in government plans. As one participant noted, *“We wanted to show The Hague and larger society that we don't agree, and we won't accept this”* (pc, 2023). However, what ‘this’ means exactly differed greatly between farmers. The protest brought together a diverse group of farmers, ranging from large, industrial dairy farmers to organic producers and more peasant-like farmers (van der Ploeg, 2020). Participants noted various motivations ranging from *“the need for a more certain future when it comes to farming”*, and *“respect and support for all the work that farmers do”* to *“better prices”* and *“against the threat from the government towards the existence and persistence of farmers”* (pc, 2023).

Van der Ploeg (2020) analyses the puzzling and ambiguous nature of the protests in its early days, when the larger sentiment of a government not understanding nor wanting to understand the situation Dutch farmers were in, still had the overhand and managed to mobilize a large cross section of farmers. On the one hand *“the demonstrating farmers said they would not accept unequal treatment anymore and that farmer bashing had to come to an end. At the same time, they claimed to want respect and opposed being curtailed”* (p. 590). Over the 2019-2022 period the demands of the protest cycle were redefined and crystalized as the government announces concrete plans to reduce nitrogen emissions. The immediate concerns of the farmers were the proposed emission cuts, which included the, potentially forced, buying out of farmers with high-emitting farms nearby nature areas. Each of these proposed policies, the protests claimed, were an attempt to further subject and marginalise farmers, as illustrated by the slogans *“No countryside without farmers”*, *“Wake up, the largest exploiter and criminal is the government”*, and *“Don't let the farmer drown”* (pc, 2023).

Broad support by non-farmer groups indirectly or directly involved with agriculture was most striking in the role of contract workers. Their tractors were important for the visibility and

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<sup>5</sup> to demand more airtime for farmers and a retraction of the data on nitrogen emissions.

effectiveness of the protests, used in the blockades. These contract workers are often (young) farmer daughters and sons who do not (yet) have their own farm. As one of the participants in my research noted; *“Young people currently do some of the heaviest and most intensive labour on the farm but have the desire to one day be in their [contractors’] position”* (pc, 2023). The participation of these future farmers contrasts starkly to the total absence of another group of essential agricultural wage-labourers: (seasonal) migrant workers, laying bare the different power dynamics at play. While migrant labour and productivity is significant for the Dutch economy, their precarious position renders them with little power (Siegmann et al., 2021).

The protests became a symbol for a larger dissatisfaction with current national politics, with the nitrogen crisis and the governments’ subsequent ‘targeting’ of farmers – as several participants called it. Other groups involved in the food production chain and in other (often blue-collar) industries, joined the protests to voice their concerns with the proposed emission cuts, and to express their solidarity. One interviewee commented that the presence of non- farmers at the protests showed *“that this issue [of government intervention in agriculture] is one which concerns everyone in the countryside, everyone in The Netherlands. We are done with a government which is unable to care for its people”* (pc, 2023). There was also a linkage with urban groups who, fuelled by disagreement with the government’s actions during the COVID-19 pandemic, saw the farmers’ protests as another example of the Dutch government going after *“it’s hardworking citizens”* (ibid.).

Farmer organizations and protest groups made use of collective action frames and POS to get different farmers to join in on the protests. Because the government actions mostly impacted dairy farmers, farmer organizations used collective action frames to get a broad group of farmers behind the same cause. Protest group Agractie and far-right militant group FDF aided the feeling that action had to be undertaken by framing the current policies as an attack against farmers and the countryside at large. The slogan used by Agractie signifies this clearly; ‘our sector is at stake.’ Arable farmers, most of whom are not directly affected by the nitrogen policies, were mobilized by the solidarity call of for the Dutch arable farmers union (NAV), under the guise of solidarity and *“collective action against the government”* (pc, 2023). It was not just the government that the farmers saw as their antagonist. One of the spokespersons for Land- en Tuinbouworganisatie (LTO), the largest farmers organization in The Netherlands, framed the protests as a larger form of resistance, which was ignited with the pigsty occupation by animal rights activists in 2019, signifying the need for all farmers to act (ANP, 2019).

It is important to note, however, that the aforementioned protests were not the sole expressions of frustration or dissent among farmers. Several farmers and farmer groups chose to not participate in the protest, such as Toekomstboeren, as one member noted: *“while we understand the frustrations that farmers have with the government and their inability to provide us with a certain future, we don’t see the solution in innovation, less environmental regulations, and industrialised agriculture”* (pc, 2023). An alternative expression of disagreement is the Groenboerenplan (Green farmers’ plan). They presented their ten-point program with concrete plans for a sustainable agricultural system, with a just income for farmers, to the government in the summer of 2022. Other farmers decided to wear green handkerchiefs, which could also be seen at climate protests, as a symbol for ‘green farmers’ (ibid.). As one member of Toekomstboeren commented *“there was a hope that the farmer protests would have resulted in the realisation that all farmers are being exploited by agro-capital, but instead the protests turned reactionary, fed by the decades of rural change and abandonment”* (ibid.). The emergence of the protests cannot simply be explained by nitrogen policies but must be linked to a broader historical and social context.

## 3.2 Understanding the Context: Social Differentiation and Abandonment in the Countryside

*“The farmers’ protests are about more than farmers, they are about the survival of the countryside” (arable farmer, pc, 2023)*

The transformation of agricultural production in the Netherlands and its incorporation into the global-industrial food system has radically changed the position of the farmer and of the countryside at large. Edelman (2021) provides a framework to aid the understanding of different trends and factors which, together, give shape to the emergence of a regressive rural voting block by analysing how the creation of ‘sacrifice zones’ – i.e., areas of abandonment, economically shattered, with an increase of social and health issues – contributed to the significant rural vote for Trump in the 2016 elections. In the US context, the decline caused by neoliberal restructuring and financialization induces stress and provides a breeding ground for regressive (authoritarian) politics. Capital infiltration has systematically undermined institutions that previously allowed for the reinvestment of locally acquired wealth, weakening social safety nets. It is the intersection of multiple processes which caused social networks and communities in rural zones to shatter, providing fertile breeding ground for regressive politics. Thus, the rise of regressive rural populism in The Netherlands must be understood in the context of class differentiation (including proletarianization), capital penetration into the countryside, and the social and cultural transformation that have, together, given shape to the countryside and its farming communities as they exist now.

Over the past decades, “public investment has predominantly flowed to metropolitan areas in the West, while largely surpassing the peripheries along the German border” (Engelen, 2023, para. 8). Social services such as GPs, hospitals, libraries, supermarkets, and public transport have steadily disappeared from rural areas (CBS, 2017a; Milikowski 2020).<sup>6</sup> The government policy of ‘decentralisation’, a cost-cutting measure in disguise, has transferred responsibilities to municipal governments while withholding, part of, the funds and expertise previously used to fulfil them, - thereby hampering social services increasing the psychological distance between government and resident (Koens, 2021). Despite recent trends of people moving to the countryside in search of cheaper housing and away from busy cities, the past decades have witnessed a pull away from towns and villages towards bigger urban areas (CBS, 2022; During et al., 2023). Especially the most remote villages, marked by agricultural activity, been heavily impacted (Steenbekers et al., 2017). The large shifts in employment due to the industrialization of agriculture, the migration towards and from cities, the aging of populations and the emergence of the agro-industry changed the make-up of the tight-knit villages and towns. In line with the observations of Williams on the making of the mental imagery of the countryside, a small-scale farmer commented during one of our conversations; *“It feels like there is a clash of cultures occurring on the countryside, the pensioner versus the slurry tank. A trend of retired people from urban areas who are buying up property to enjoy the quiet green environment versus the ever-growing industrial farmer who continuously needs more space, bigger machines, and larger farms”* (personal conversation, 2023).

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<sup>6</sup> The average distance to social services has increased over the past decades. Primary education: Between 1997 and 2021, 1410 primary schools were closed, resulting in 178 towns losing education facilities and 2.6 million people living further than 1 km away from primary schools – a doubling compared to 2007. Medical care: In the northern province (Groningen) the average distance to a hospital is 10.1 km – in 2007 this was 8.7 km (Koens, 2021).

It is not just the social and cultural environment of farmers that has changed rapidly the farmer itself has been transformed. An alliance of the Dutch government, agro-industry, and educational institutes have, through policy and lobbying, orchestrated a process of industrialization, intensification, and commodification within the agricultural sector, fuelled by the European-wide agricultural policies of Mansholt (Leitheiser et al., 2022). With the slogan ‘never hunger again’ the post war-era saw a rapid transition of the agricultural landscape under the guise of food security. Until the 1950s, Dutch agriculture mostly consisted of small scale, mixed farms (livestock and cereal). The government implemented policies to build an ‘efficient, competitive, and modern’ agricultural sector. The subsequent consolidation of land resulted in the proletarianization of many farmers (van den Berg et al., 2018; Grinsven & Kooman, 2017).

Considering this unequal and exploitative historical process, the farmers’ protests might seem puzzling. As van der Ploeg notes, the farmers coalition “is seeking to claim the ‘right’ to continue along the pathway that has been constructed over the last 50 years” (2022, p. 589). But if the industrial agricultural system is one of exploitation by the agro-industry, of centralization of capital and proletarianization of many farmers, then why exactly would a farmers’ protest call for the persistence of such a model?<sup>7</sup>

As a farmer who has been living in the same area her whole life commented: “*farmers have been transformed from peasants into entrepreneurs within the span of two generations. There has been a large-scale rationalization of agriculture and its impacts are visible today*”. Her observation, drawn from the differences between her grandfathers’, fathers’, and husbands’ farm, was based on both the farms’ development as well as the mentality which informed it. She continued to explain: “*The current farmers are those who have remained; there has been a selection of a specific type of farmer who is praised by LTO, the bank, and by agro-industry*” (former arable farmer, pc, 2023).

Looking at the Dutch countryside, the industrialisation and intensification of agriculture pushed hundreds of thousands of people out of farming (Grinsven & Kooman, 2017).<sup>8</sup> As the number of farms has fallen, so has employment. The amount of family members working on family farms has shifted from 479.000 (1950) to 118.000 (2016), while official numbers for non-family wage labourers has decreased from 101.000 to 54.000.<sup>9</sup> At the same time migrants have become a key labour force within the agricultural sector, especially for seasonal jobs, resulting in a continuous flux of people moving in and out of rural areas (Siegmann et al., 2022).

As a rule, those farmers who persisted through the land concentration, intensification, and monopolisation are those that became highly dependent on external inputs, caught in an agricultural treadmill to meet both stricter environmental and productivity standards (van der Ploeg, 2010). To finance their inputs and technological ‘improvements’, farmers become indebted; to compete with global markets, they are dependent on (EU) subsidies (Homolová et al., 2022; van

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<sup>7</sup> These two paragraphs are based on my own unpublished work, Saat (2023).

<sup>8</sup> The Netherlands counted 52.000 farms in 2021 in comparison to 410.000 in 1950, resulting in an average decline of 15 farms per day (1950-2014). Average farm size grew from 5,7 ha in 1950 to 32,4 ha in 2016, while surface area of agricultural land decreased by 20% (CBS, 2014; 2017b; 2023b).

<sup>9</sup> Exact data on migrant labor in agriculture is not available; in 2020 the CBS counted 21,200 workers from EU countries deployed in agriculture, forestry, and fisheries. Most migrant workers sign contracts with temporary employment agencies instead of growers themselves, nor does this include seasonal workers who work only temporarily, for 4 out of 6 months. One estimate suggests that about half of the EU migrant laborers are not reflected in the numbers of the CBS (Siegmann, 2023).

den Berg et al., 2018).<sup>10</sup> While for example the average dairy farmer has doubled both their livestock and debt since the start of the century, the overall income from their farms has not increased (Joosten, 2023). Meanwhile, agro industrial companies have profited greatly from this by extracting billions of euro's each year (Dinther, 2022). A significant number of the PCPs of the 1950s have been transformed into large-scale capitalists, oriented to global markets: three-quarters of agricultural products are destined for export. Many of the most prominent farmers during the protests are those potentially most affected by the proposed plans of the government: the highly industrialized, capital-dependent livestock farmers (van der Ploeg, 2020). In other words, the historic 'winners' in the process of class differentiation in contrast to the farmers who have been pushed out.

All this is not to say, however, that there are merely two types of farmers: those who farm no more and those who remain. It does not, for instance, seem that the decline in the number of farmers has come to an end. To illustrate: from when our family started farming in 1996 to now, we have seen fourteen farms in the area disappear. With four more farmers predicted to leave the occupation in the next few years, we expect to have just one single other farm remain. And just last month, our family received news that we might lose access to approximately 50% of our land before the next season, leaving us wondering how the farm will survive.

Few of the farmers I interviewed would be surprised by this story – in fact, they all had their own to tell. It is true that some farmers have benefited tremendously from capitalist development in the countryside, but that is not the whole picture. Nor is being ran out of business the only problem. Many are, for instance, dependent on specialisation and/or government subsidies to compete in the market, taking away their autonomy and alienating them from their land and work. To better understand these complexities, in the next section we will go into class, class relations, and different modes of farming.

### 3.3 Class in an Industrialized Agrarian Setting

*“The farmer protests’ made it look as if there is just one type of farmer. But there are so many more.” (dairy farmer, pc, 2023)*

On the 22<sup>nd</sup> of June 2022, tens of thousands of farmers gathered in Stroe, a village in the middle of The Netherlands to protest the newly announced nitrogen policies by the government. The farmers I encountered there came from across the country and had very different, some even contradictory, class positions. This was echoed again in my data collection. One of my participants still ran a traditional family farm, while another, similar farmer was dependent on seasonal wage-labour to supplement their own. One rented out his land to other farmers to secure extra income, while another, to cover the costs of this farm, was dependent on income from his contract-worker company. Despite these differences, not only in the modes of farming but also in class, protesting farmers presented themselves as a united front.

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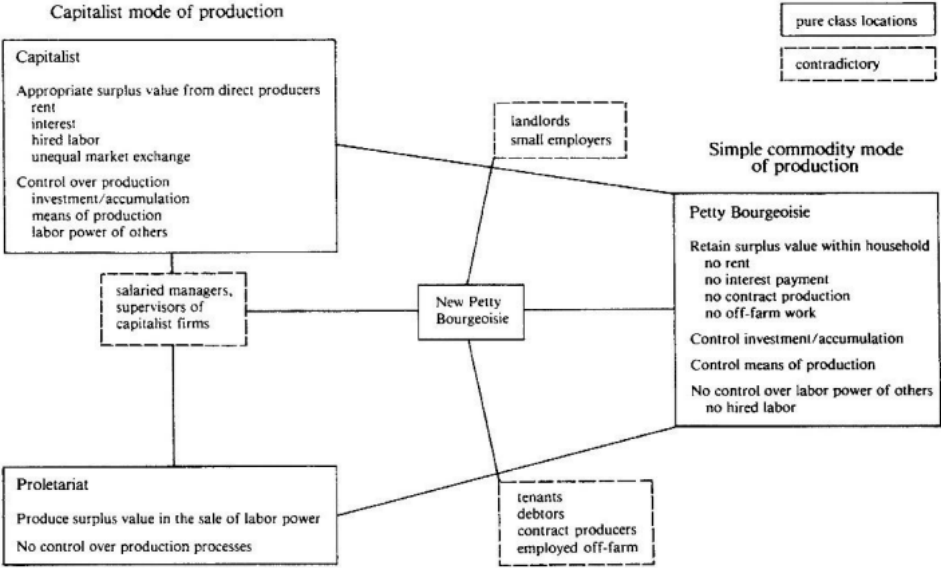
<sup>10</sup> Indebtedness is highest among dairy farmers: in 2000 the average debt was 660.000 euros, in 2019 it was 1.3 million. On average, Dutch dairy farmers receive over 1/3 of their income from subsidies. Inequities among farmers are enormous: while 36% of all farmers earn less than the minimum wage, one in five working farmers are millionaires (Joosten, 2021; 2023; Joosten et al., 2022).



Key to understanding the farmers' protests is the aforementioned history of exploitation and differentiation. As Bernstein (2010) and Lenin (1982) argue, the countryside has been transformed through the process of commoditization and capital accumulation. As explained in section 3.2, the 52,000 farmers who remain vary by how big or small their farms are, but also to what extent these farmers are fully absorbed into the industrial food system or to what extent they remain independent – more peasant-like.

The process of differentiation is highly unequal and does not progress linearly; rather, it creates contradictions and blurred lines with grey zones (van der Ploeg, 2018). Mooney's (1983) analysis of midwestern agriculture in the USA (fig. 1) provides a theoretical model of class structure. The model largely follows the class analysis provided by Wright, adapting it to an industrialized, capitalist agrarian setting. This model expands the definition of the 'old' petty bourgeoisie, which in the early development of capitalism were mainly PCP's, to include all those 'middle classes' that have developed since – those that do not fit neatly into a box of 'labourer', 'capitalist', or '(old) petty bourgeoisie', if ever these categories were void of contradictions. Such examples include the smallholder farmer who is also employed off-farm (part PCP, part labourer) or the (middle) manager of a corporation (part worker, part capitalist representative). All these are part of what the author calls the 'new petty bourgeoisie', or the petty bourgeoisie in the context of industrialised, capitalist agriculture. The author highlights that, rather than acquiring surplus value directly through wage-labour, "capital develops [ways] to strip simple commodity producers of this surplus value" (Mooney, 1983, p. 567).

**Figure 1** Theoretical model of class structure in midwestern agriculture



Source: Mooney, 1983, p. 577

To understand the position of agrarian classes in protest, Marx' observation on the role of peasant in election of Napoleon Bonaparte remains relevant (and hotly debated) among scholars to this day. Marx argues that the peasant, the agrarian, is not regressive by definition:

But let there be no misunderstanding. The Bonaparte dynasty represents not the revolutionary, but the conservative peasant; not the peasant that strikes out beyond the condition of his social existence, the small holding, but rather the peasant who wants to consolidate this holding, not the country folk who, linked up with the towns, want to

overthrow the old order through their own energies, but on the contrary those who, in stupefied seclusion with this old order, want to see themselves and their small holdings saved and favored by the ghost of the empire. It represents not the enlightenment, but the superstition of the peasant; not his judgment but his prejudice; not his future, but his past. (Marx, 1852, p. 171).

What the above does not sufficiently account for, however, is the ways in which different farmers relate to capital or the ways in which different modes of farming might influence class agency and class consciousness. Though Mooney touches upon farmers' relation to (agro-industrial) capital, much remains to be said. To better understand the different degrees and nuance that persist among farmers, even and especially within one class, the work by van der Ploeg (2018) is particularly insightful. He distinguishes between entrepreneurial and peasant-like farmers (table 2). This allows for a better understanding to of the degree to which petty bourgeois farmers are dependent upon and intertwined with (agro-industrial) capital. My findings and experiences suggest that those who have a farm which is highly self-sufficient and has a lower dependency on the global industrialised food system, for example, are more likely to be critical of the capitalist system and its manifestations in the agro-industry.

**Table 1** The main differences between the peasant and entrepreneurial mode of farming

<i>Peasant mode</i>	<i>Entrepreneurial mode</i>
Builds upon and internalizes nature; co-production and co-evolution are central	Disconnected from nature; 'artificial' modes of farming
Distantation from markets on the input side; differentiation on the output side (low degree of commoditization)	High market dependency; high degree of commoditization
Centrality of craft and skill-oriented technologies	Centrality of entrepreneurship and mechanical technologies
Ongoing intensification based on quantity and quality of labour	Scale enlargement is the dominant trajectory; and intensity is a function of technology
Multifunctional	Specialized
Reciprocal interrelations between farms	Competitive relationships
Continuity of past, present, and future	Ruptures between past, present, and future
High levels of value added in relation to gross value of production (VA/GVP)	Low levels of VA/GVP
Increasing social wealth	Containing and redistributing social wealth

*Source:* Van der Ploeg, 2018, p. 63

The role of class in the expression of populism and farmer upheaval is important, for it influences the regressive or progressive nature of a protest cycle. Agrarian protest does not often develop neatly along the lines of class as historical and contemporary examples show. Pattenden (2023), for example, notes that the character of (rural) populism is more likely to be reactionary when farmers who accumulate, or most of the petty bourgeois farmers in our context, make up a large section of the movement.

Ultimately, it becomes clear that the participation in a regressive farmers' movement can only be understood through the lens of class if it is "conceived in complex, spatial, relational, dynamic and indeed anthropological ways" (Kalb, 2023, p. 206). As Kalb argues, the contributing factors are "all-round, economic as well as discursive, cultural as well as material (and political,

social, etc.), driven both by capital and its valorization and by state hegemonies and their selective biases and outright exclusions” (ibid.). The discussion of these factors up to now might well be summarised as the abandonment of, and class differentiation on, the countryside. However, what I have so far only touched upon superficially (but frequently) is the powers outside the countryside, looming over the it and its farmers: agro-industrial capital and its political representatives.

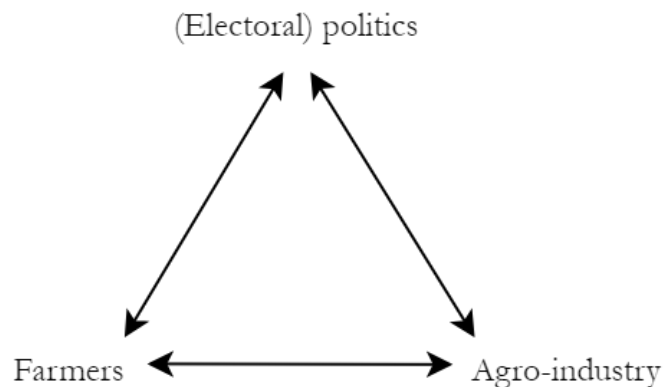
## 4 From Rural to National, From the Margins to the Mainstream – Farmers and Right-Wing Political Parties

*“I would rather share my knowledge and experience with other farmers than with the big corporations, so I can remain autonomous and independent”  
(arable farmer currently converting to regenerative farming, pc, 2023)*

The social and historical conditions which have created the contemporary Dutch farmers and provided a breeding ground for rural populism are only part of the story. The next step is analysing the other actors within the protest coalition, the agro-industry and electoral politics, and their role in the way in which rural populism and right-wing populism have linked up.

Much research on rural and right-wing populism focuses on the relationship between farmers or (rural) citizens and populist political parties. What has until now not received the appropriate weight in the field, however, is a third actor: the agro-industry, or the capitalist class at large. The participants in protest coalition, this author argues, are best represented in a triangular relationship (see fig. 2), which explains the way in which the different actors relate to each other. This chapter addresses the direct involvement and power influence of the agro-industry within the farmers’ protests coalition and the consequences this has for the future trajectory of individual farmers, government policies, and more fundamentally, the narratives created around industrial agriculture in the Netherlands.

**Figure 2** A visual representation of the actors and relations behind the farmers’ protests



Source: This author

### 4.1 The Agro-Industry & Protests

*“Take one while you still can, if it was up to the government, we wouldn’t be able to eat them anymore” (An employee of Vion handing out free hamburgers at a farmers’ protest, personal observation, 2022).*

The farmers’ protests are a real-life example of the entanglement of the farmer and the industry visible on several levels. As an activist I have been to plenty of protests, but the one in Stroe was completely different: surrounding the stage were several trucks from animal feed companies like AgriFirm, AgruniekRijnvallie, and ForFarmers, while meat processor Vion handed out free burgers

and sausages. Many non-sponsors, meanwhile, had their trucks and signage in less prominent positions. As the farmer' protests progress, it became nearly impossible to see trucks or (other) advertisements from agro industrial corporations that did not have slogans like 'proud of our farmers' printed on them. This was not a one-way street either as van der Ploeg (2020) illustrates: when companies like dairy processor FrieslandCampina hesitated to support the protests because it clashed with their marketing strategy on 'sustainability', farmers blocked their factories and headquarters.

Occasionally, critiques towards the agro-industry were present, but they have yet to materialize into a systemic analysis and broader campaign among farmers. One example were the blockades organised at supermarket distributional centres, where farmers blocked all access and prevented the supply to supermarkets around the country. The demands remained ambiguous though centred around the price farmers receive for their produce – often 10 times less than the supermarket price. Additionally, farmers wanted to illustrate to “*ignorant city folks*” and politicians what they meant with the slogan “*No Farmers, no food*”: empty shelves. Supermarkets were viewed as too big and powerful, making it difficult for farmers to make ends meet (Redactie Boerenbusiness, 2020; BNR Webredactie, 2022; pc, 2023). But these forms of discontent with industry were few, however, and in the end capitalist interests were protected and reinforced by the protests.

This is not the first time such dynamics could be observed. In the 1990s the government introduced plans to reduce the number of pigs with 25% to limit the excessive manure production that was causing damage to surrounding ecosystems. The proposed plans were met with large scale protests, organized by the Dutch Union of Pigfarmers (NVV), who mobilized on broader sentiments of frustration (Blokzijl, 2023). One pig farmer commented on this in an interview at the time:

The total dissatisfaction goes way deeper than just manure, at this moment we are protesting because of the manure because it's a topic that we can mobilize on, but the whole issue goes way deeper. The government which is imposing things on us which we can never meet, only cost us money, concerning issues which countries around us don't have, that is frustrating. (ibid.; 15:27)

This way, smaller pig farmers were mobilized in opposition to policies which would mostly be disadvantageous for the large-scale farmers and industry. The protests gained broader attention and momentum due to the number of farmers, their tractor's visibility, and the weaponisation of emotions and frustrations by for example, placing crying female farmers in front of the camera (van der Ploeg, pc, 2023) In the end, after years of judicial processes with the NVV, reduction of the number of pigs was achieved due to the reduction of pig farmers (Blokzijl, 2023). These kinds of processes have the net effect that the class interest of small farmers is subsumed by and subordinated to big farmers and agro-business. Parallels can be drawn to a Global South context, where movements with a distinct class differentiation are far more prevalent and visible (Pattenden, 2023). Borrás observes how a:

Middle and rich peasant movement dominates the regional or national rural politics, claiming to represent all 'people of the land'—poor, middle and large, subsistence and commercially oriented peasants—even when its demands and interests, and the results of its mobilizations, favour only the middle and rich commercial farmers. (2023a, p. 466)

Rather than a middle and rich peasant, in the Dutch past and present we see capitalist farmers and the agro-industry claiming to represent 'the farmer' while their interests only serve the few. Understanding why farmers view the agro-industry as an ally rather than an antagonist requires an in-depth analysis of the way in which the agro-industry constructs and upholds cultural hegemony.

Marx controversial statement, calling the peasant masses “a sack of potatoes” comes to mind: “they cannot represent themselves; they must be represented” (1852, p.170). Building on his analysis but expressing himself in more sophisticated terms, Engels (1894) argued that the peasant inhabited an important and ambiguous political position. That is, being neither a capitalist exploiter nor a disposed proletarian, the interests of the peasant could easily be diverted and mobilized by powerful class interests. While a lot has changed since then, what is clear is that today’s farmers have an important position. Rather than a middle and rich peasant, as in Borras’ example, in the Dutch past and present we see capitalist farmers and the agro-industry claiming to represent ‘the farmer’ while their interests only serve the few. To understand how this process unfolds, with many farmers seeing agro-industry as allies rather than antagonists, we need to analyse the way in which the industry constructs and maintains cultural hegemony under capitalism.

## 4.2 The Power Dynamics behind the Protests: Capitalism, Agro-Industry and Cultural Hegemony

*The bourgeois order, which at the beginning of the century set the state to stand guard over the newly emerged small holdings and fertilized them with laurels, has become a vampire that sucks the blood from their hearts and brains and casts them into the alchemist’s caldron of capital. (Marx, 1852, p 171)*

Looking at the farmers’ protests, one is reminded of Marx’s literary illustration of 18<sup>th</sup> century France, comparing the capitalist class to vampires who suck the life out of small holder farmers. There is an uncanny resemblance between his description of emerging farmers celebrated and praised by the bourgeois order while simultaneously being exploited by this class, and the recent “Proud of our farmers” sloganeering of agro-industrial corporations.

In my conversations with farmers, certain narratives were frequently repeated and used to justify the status quo, to wave off systemic transformation, and to discredit alternative modes of agriculture. These narratives also provided legitimization of the protests and aided the discrediting of nitrogen reduction measures through climate change-denial or ulterior motives for the governments plan to buy farmers out. These narratives were also flagged by several farmers as explanations to why such a diverse group of farmers joined in on the protests and resisted structural change. Below (table 2) the most frequent narratives are presented, including the frequency with which I encountered them and to show the underlying assumptions that uphold these narratives.

**Table 2** An overview of common narratives encountered in my field work

Common narratives	Frequency	Assumption
Current mode of industrial agriculture is necessary to feed the world and produce enough food	6x	Other modes of agriculture (such as organic, agro-ecological, regenerative) will be unable to do so, therefore a system transformation of the food system would cause hunger/food shortages.
Dutch farmers are the most efficient and/or sustainable farmers in the world	5x	Dutch agriculture is efficient; therefore, change elsewhere in the world will have more effect
The agricultural sector has already improved/become more sustainable/become more efficient so much over the past years	4x	Change is already happening, the willingness and effort is there within the agricultural sector, enough is already being done.
If things are produced more sustainably, with less pesticides etc., foods/products will just be imported from elsewhere which have fewer/no regulations.	4x	Only changing the agricultural system in The Netherlands will not lead to sustainable change.
Nature is being put above agriculture by the government/society in importance	6x	Nature and agriculture are separated and do not go together, therefore there is a dichotomy where the choice is between more space for nature or more space for agriculture.
Other industries are not being held responsible; farmers are being 'punished' more; agricultural sector must solve everything; farmers presented as criminals/doing something wrong suddenly.	5x	Change must come from other sectors in our society.
There is a small minority which is anti-farmer/anti-agriculture but is the most visible/the loudest	4x	The need and urgency for change in the food system is not as broadly supported as it might seem (in for example the media)
The government and civil servants are causing polarization and have broken the trust with its citizens due to various scandals and inability to solve what is going wrong	7x	The government is responsible but not able to act to the interest of citizens
Alternative agricultural modes (organic, regenerative etc.) has no market and no secure revenue model	6x	Consumer must make a different choice, power lies with the consumer, if the consumer changes the market and farmers will change too
Data on nitrogen are false/ not correct, government is presenting half-truths, rules and regulations are a black box	8x	Ulterior motives by government to target farmers, such as a 'battle over land'

*Source:* This author

These narratives are an example of the way in which the cultural hegemony and organic ideology of the agro-industry operate. By understanding the agro-industry as part of a hegemonic class and (most of) the farmers as subordinate, organic ideology and cultural hegemony operate in the following manner:

a hegemonic class held state power through its economic supremacy and through its ability to have, among other things, successfully articulated or expressed in a coherent, unified fashion the most essential elements in the ideological discourses of the subordinate classes in civil society (Ramos, 1982, p. 4).

By integrating diverse class interests and practices into a unified system of socioeconomic relations, the agro-industry aids the diffusion of an organic ideology (Ramos, 1982). The agro-industry and its complicity in the upholding of cultural hegemony, significantly slows down the emergence of class polarization and antagonism and instead aids agro capital in dealing with the crisis of expanded reproduction. Rather than allowing a working-class political mentality to solidify, which can lead to a conscious detangling of the agro-industrial/farmer relationship, it ensures the making and continuation of a regressive rural populist coalition.

Cultural hegemony is achieved by control over three things; intellectuals within society, the education within society, and the philosophy that drives people to action (Gramsci, 1971). Because the entanglement of farmers with the agro-industry is reinforced throughout daily life and work on the farm, discerning how these relationships manifest themselves is complex. The vested interest of the agro-industry, increasingly shaped by processes of financialization, globalization, and accumulation, lies with the expansion and reinforcement of a globalized industrial agricultural system (Clapp & Purugganan, 2020; McMichael, 2013). This interest is pursued in various ways, ranging from lobbying and intervention on a political level to the influencing and reality creation on the level of the farm(er). This last one is of particular interest in this research for it provides insight into the making of regressive populism.

One direct and, for many farmers, very familiar way in which the agro-industry shapes their worldview is through so-called ‘erfbetreders’, employees of agro-industrial companies who visit farmers to offer financial advice or to share the latest technological developments and products for the farmer to use. Many of these means are more indirect, however. In the subsequent sections, we will look at how cultural hegemony is maintained through media control, educational & research control, and the upholding and legitimization of a philosophy centred around a belief in the market combined with matter-of-fact attitude, a tight-knit social, conservative cultural setting and the popularized narrative of farmers stewards of the countryside.

#### **4.2.1 The Agro-Industry and Media**

Most sector-specific news and updates within the Dutch agricultural world are spread through the channels of agricultural media, their social media platforms, magazines, newspapers, and newsletters. A glance at these websites shows that there are over 45 different magazines, often with their own media channels and newsletters, run by the 4 major agrarian press outlets: AgriPers, Misset, Agrimedia, and Agrio. All are dependent on their income through direct client requests, subscriptions and/or advertisements, often fulfilled by agro-industrial companies.

The media is not only of important influence on the day-to-day of farming operations but also impacts the way in which farmers give meaning to, understand, and view the world and that which is labelled as important. The influence of the agro-industry on media and the selective sharing of information was illustrated in my field research. One farmer, who is currently transitioning towards regenerative farming, commented on the contrast between the articles he was reading about soil quality and fertility in the Netherlands in the agricultural media and his observations on his own fields. He had to actively search for information and news outside of the



conventional agricultural media for explanations and solutions for the issues he faced in regard to soil fertility on his farm.

In their work on the political economy of the mass media, Herman and Chomsky (2002) draw on the theory by Gramsci to explain the role the media has in shaping our society and upholding power structures, stating that “the media serve, and propagandize on behalf of, the powerful societal interests that control and finance them” (p.xi). The dominant ideologies and basic principles are fixed and shaped by the same power sources that own media, fund advertisements, and define ‘the news’ (ibid.). “The public is not sovereign over the media – the owners and managers, seeking ads, decide what is to be offered, and the public must choose among these”. If people do not get information on that which interests them, that is because the corporations “who control the media choose not to offer such material (Ibid, xix)”. This analysis can be extended to the agricultural media for the dependency of the media on income from the agro-industry, means that the selection of topics, distribution of concerns, the emphasis, and the framing of issues, the filtering of information, and the bounding of debate are controlled by the interests of (agro-)capital. The narratives crafted by these media outlets are therefore largely in line with the agricultural industrial system. A comment by an organic farmer over a cup of coffee illustrates this well “*if you want to understand why these intensive dairy farmers [in his surroundings] all think they are doing well, you should open up one of those agricultural magazines for a change. That will explain it*” (pc, 2023).

#### **4.2.2 The Agro-Industry in Education and Research**

This lack of knowledge does not start with the distribution of knowledge, with media, but can already be observed at the sites of knowledge production and reproduction: research and education. . One participant commented that: “*agricultural education in the Netherlands teaches only one mode of agriculture and one method only, one of continuous investment and growth*” (pc, 2023). Several farmers commented on the type of education they received, signalling the shortcomings of their and their children’s knowledge in overcoming current challenges on their farm – such as the search for more extensive modes of production, or using fewer of artificial fertilizers and chemicals.

Understanding the dependency and interrelation of the agro-industry with the agricultural education system in the Netherlands is an important aspect of the construction of cultural hegemony. These agricultural educational institutes are in different ways connected to the agro-industry, either through (research) partnerships, internship opportunities, or through the funding of educational materials, such as advertisements in educational material or the design of lesson programs. Part of their funding, of course, also comes from the neoliberal government. The result is a curriculum that focuses on a pro-industry, pro-intensification, pro-large scale, and anti-organic narrative (pc, 2023).

The embedment of the agro-industry expands into university. Wageningen University & Research (WUR), the leading agricultural university of the Netherlands and the world, which produces research that is widely used in government policies and agricultural management. The WUR has been criticized and scrutinized by researchers, students, farmers, and activist groups for the visible and invisible role that the agro-industry fulfils in the funding and shaping of research produced by the university. Research is directly and indirectly funded by agro-industrial companies, corporations like FrieslandCampina and Unilever have offices on campus that are bigger than some university buildings, and the now-former president of the board had a seat on the advisory board of Syngenta, one of the world’s largest agro-chemical producers (Boerengroep, 2016; Het Onderzoekslab 2020; Daalder & Ede Botje, 2023; pc, 2023). A recent journalistic investigation showed how the agrochemical industry uses the WUR to gain regulatory approval of chemicals and genetic engineering by influencing decision makers, muddying the waters with contradictory research reports, and by lowering the chemicals qualifying criteria (van Kerkhoven, 2023).

An important effect of this linking of agro-industry and academic research is the blurring of lines between the independence and (perceived) neutrality of academic research and the (economic) interests of corporations. For instance, several of my interviewees dismissed the scientific data about the nitrogen emissions because the WUR was “*not a trustworthy institute*”, because research “*could simply be bought*”, or because “*research will just be disproven in a few years anyway*” (pc, 2023).

It is noteworthy that farmers focused their scepticism on environmental research, rather than research done on the efficiency and effects of machinery, technological advancements, or emission-cutting technologies. In this regard, McCarthy (2019) notes that the continuous emphasizing of “*credentialed expertise underpinning environmental science fuels populist resentment in counterproductive ways*” (p. 305). Under populism, a perceived (need for) hegemony over nature is combined with a general distrust towards (scientific) institutions.

Taken together, this shows how the education and research are used to justify the industrial food system, presenting it as the only viable one and influencing politics to reinforce it. Subtler are the ways in which alternatives are dismissed, i.e. by misrepresenting them or ignoring them all together. Most flagrant, however, is how during the protest cycle, populist distrust of science organically came together with the agro-industry’s hegemony over knowledge production in the form of Agrifacts.

Founded as a lobby group which combines scientific research with investigative journalism, the agenda of Agrifacts consists of discrediting, opposing, and/or creating doubt about the data and policies presented by the Dutch government or, for example, nitrogen data and research on agriculture’s effects on soil and water quality (Harmsen, 2020). The organisation is funded by agricultural companies such as De Heus and meat processor VanDrie Group. Their research is broadly cited in agricultural media, used by the BBB and other right-wing/populist parties in policy briefs, and receives broad support by i.e., Agractie and FDF (Heck, 2023). The group has also been connected to the sending of cease-and-desist letters and threatening messages to organizations and groups which, according to Agrifacts, present an untruthful representation of the facts.<sup>11</sup> Various researchers and journalists have discredited and disputed Agrifacts research for cherry picking the used data, omitting facts and figures, and the lack of transparency of their agenda and funding (Harmsen, 2020; Heck, 2023). Reputable investigative journalism bureau *Follow the Money* went so far as to label the research organisation as an extension of the industrial agricultural lobby (Harmsen, 2020).

### 4.2.3 The Agro Industry & Farmers’ Ideology

The last facet is not so much actively constructed by the agro-industry, but rather concerns the effects that the capitalist economic system has on farmers’ philosophy, worldview, or ideology. My conversations with farmers always began with asking why they had decided to become a farmer. The three most common answers were (1) the sense of freedom, (2) that they never really considered (or thought they had) any other options, and (3) the challenge of being an entrepreneur. Especially the last answer gives an insight into the associations farmers have with what is to be a farmer and to farm. Indirectly, the answer reflects how farming has been

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<sup>11</sup> For example, the water company Vitens, received a letter from Agrifacts in 2019 after they promoted eating less meat as a measure to reduce water consumption. Agrifacts labelled this as misrepresentation and threatened with juridical steps if the company did not remove the advice from their website, citing it to be harmful to their sector. The text has since then been removed (Harmsen, 2020).

transformed and shaped through the development of capitalism. The contradictions that emerge when food is produced in competition for profit were often visible in the struggles that farmers experienced. Aside from the insecurity caused by unpredictable government politics, the biggest challenge which farmers perceived for the future of their farm was the need to “*grow or get out*”. This entailed the continuous need to adapt and expand to stay ahead of the competition. This caused clashes with other goals, such as the desire to become more sustainable or the wish to reduce debts or simplify farming operations, which were signified by one poultry farmer in saying “*actually I would like to be less intensive, but I can’t make a living if I do*” (pc, 2023).

On the one hand, farmers perceive the market as an unplannable entity which complicates the possibility to be more sustainable or to adopt a different farming practice, often citing a lack of demand. Simultaneously, they see the market as the one thing on which they can rely. Market forces and competition are ‘holy’, in contrast to the government, which farmers perceive to continuously interfere and complicate their business. It is this antagonistic relation to the government and the dependency and belief in the ‘free market’ that dominates the worldview of many farmers. Combined with a tight-knit social, conservative cultural setting and a very specific image about the role and position of the farmer, the agro-industry and populist parties capitalize on this worldview, shaping and reinforcing it.

This is visible in the propagation of an image of the farmer as a hardworking steward of the countryside and its ecosystems, as seen in advertisements and on products, which is further emphasized by farmers, farming organizations, and several right-wing political parties. Such mental images and idyllic visions are used as vehicles within populist narratives and agendas. Just as idealizations of the countryside, its history and traditions were central in the rural populist protest cycles in the USA and Russia (late 19<sup>th</sup> century) (see Taggart 2000), similar narratives are mobilized in the Netherlands. For instance, the BBB wrote in the introduction of their manifest that:

Farmers care for the landscape, are the stewards of the region, take care of job availability, the economy, tourism, recreation, nature- and landscape management, and above all the social cohesion on the countryside. If the farmers disappear, there will be massive consequences for the countryside as we know it now. (2022, p. 2)

The position and image of the countryside, with the farmer at its core, is strengthened by the urban-rural divide, the construction of the ‘urban’ and ‘countryside’ as separate from one another. This is visible by the way in which farmers talked about the city and its inhabitants as “*they over there*”, “*a small minority with a loud voice*” and “*people who have all these ideas about the future of our country without knowing anything about the reality on the land*” (pc, 2023). This perceived divide between the urban and rural became most apparent when a farmer asked me if I could please tell him a bit more about the mentality of people in the city since I, as a resident, must know more about what is going on over there. In addition, some farmers experience strong ties to land, a (generational) family farm, or their immediate surroundings and frame the world through a localized experience with a national government which feels distant, disconnected, either playing no role or being an ‘enemy of the people’. This perceived distance is also experienced between farmer and consumer. For example, the broad support by people from an urban background during the farmer protests surprised many farmers for they had perceived “the city” to be against them. Contrastingly, several farmers noted how “*even people in their direct surroundings had a lack of knowledge about farming*”, which often resulted in, in their eyes, misunderstandings about the farmer (pc, 2023).

In all of the ways described in section 4.2 through which (agro-industrial) capital’s cultural hegemony is maintained, the already close-knit social ties on the countryside and especially among farmers, are further strengthened. The feelings, narratives, and sentiments of being

undervalued, feeling criminalized, and perceiving a direct threat from the government who is out to take their land or wants them to quit farming all together, where being echoed and strengthened on (social) media and in communities. The existence of such tight-knit communities results in two different situations; firstly, any deviation from the norm (by being vocally opposed to the farmers protests or by individually changing ones farming practices) results in scrutiny, judgement, loss of social ties and connections, and/or reduced access to knowledge and ones (local) community Secondly, there is a fear, justified by actual occurrences, of direct (physical) threats, intimidation, and vandalism when people deviate from the norm. Especially in moments of heightened tension, any deviation from the norm receives scrutiny.

This is further intensified by the beforementioned ‘clash of cultures’ and the demographic and social changes in rural areas over the past decades. Simultaneous, the countryside is perceived as this place “*where everything needs to happen*”, it is a “*battle for space*” as one farmer commented. It is the place where there is available room to build houses to solve the housing shortage in the Netherlands, it is here where the energy transition is taking place in the shape of large scale solar- and wind energy parks, and simultaneously food production is still expected to happen. So rather than questioning the position and contribution of the agro-industry to the changing countryside, the existing differences between the urban and rural are mobilized and exaggerated further in relation to the position of the farmer and the need for protest.

### **4.3 Who Represents the Farmer? Understanding the Political Landscape & Electoral Consequences**

*“BBB represents the farmers, the agro-industry, and the countryside, the interest of the farmer is finally back on the map” (dairy farmer, pc, 2023).*

Unlike other examples of right-wing populism in the Global North, the Netherlands witnessed a creation of a populist coalition largely originating from the countryside and upheld by people in the countryside, resulting in an electorally successful party. Within the highly fragmented and divided landscape of the parliamentary democratic system in the Netherlands (current parliament houses 17 different parties), the BBB managed to gain large electoral support on a single-topic agrarian agenda. It is a real-life manifestation of the inquiry posed by Taggart (2016); what happens when a populist protest coalition becomes connected or expressed through a political party? Not only that, what happens when this populist protest coalition is influenced by big agro-capital?

Increased fragmentation and inability to successfully address the needs of farmers by farmers-organizations and political parties has resulted in a landscape where the main representation of farmers has manifested itself in a regressive populist party and extreme right-wing groups. In 2019, at the start of the protests, established far right political parties such as PVV flocked to protest stages and the media to defend and praise the farmer with statements such as “*you are the heroes of the Netherlands*”, “*farmers deserve respect*” and “*farmers don’t have to pay, The Hague will?*” (NOS Nieuws, 2019). At the same time, the parties with a historically large farmer’s electorate were part of the government which had proposed plans to reduce nitrogen emissions in the first place, resulting in statements made by farmer group LTO that “*the only political party which really stood up for the farmer, CDA, has had less power over the past years?*” (Schelfaut, 2019).

So, in contrast to the developments in, for example Spain (Vox), France (Comités Jeanne), and Italy (Fratelli d’Italia), where right-wing parties (successfully) appealed to a rural electoral base by campaigning on some specific issues or catching onto the general sentiment of ‘being left behind’, the Dutch farmers’ protests and the support it received has manifested itself into a political block in the shape of BBB with agriculture and the plight of the farmer as a central issue (Iocco, 2020; Mamanova & Franquesa, 2020; Valero, 2022). The party emerged in a highly divided and fragmented parliamentary political field, jumping into a vacuum which had been left and created

by other political parties who had, over the years abandoned, the rural and agrarian as an important part of their political campaign (pc, 2023). By building onto the core view expressed in the protests of farmers as the fundament of the countryside, the party amplified the beforementioned narratives in their campaign, speeches, and political debates (BBB, 2021). Participants who voted for the BBB identified the party as “*giving a voice to farmers*”, “*creating visibility*”, “*being pragmatic and down to earth*”, and “*finally having practical knowledge in The Hague again*” (pc, 2023).

BBB has direct and close ties to the agro-industry, exemplifying the way in which the triangular relationship of the protest coalition operates. The party was founded in November 2019, shortly after the first protests, by employees of marketing agency ReMarkable. One of the, now ex, partners of the bureau announced the plan to “*use politics as a tool to shape the voice of and for the countryside*” (Vermeer, 2021). Remarkable has agro industrial companies as its clients, such as Bayer, the second largest agrochemical company worldwide. In addition, several politicians of the BBB have ties to the agro-industry through for instance secondary positions in agricultural companies or organizations. Such an example is senator and chair of the commission on agriculture, Gert-Jan Oplaat who is also lobbyist and chairman of Avec EU (the European organization of poultry processors) and the Dutch poultry processing industry. While lobbying practices of the agro-industry in The Hague (or Brussels) are not new, the interweaving of politics, political positions, and the defence of agro-industrial interests has become more explicit with the BBB victory (Ede Botje, 2023).

The BBB’s electoral success seems however, to be short lived. As this research is being written, polls for the upcoming elections (November 2023) show that the predicted seats for BBB have dwindled down from 23-29 predicted seats in June to a mere 10 in October. This is mostly due to the emergence of a new party, led by popular politician Omtzigt. The party, Nieuw Sociaal Contract is campaigning around the issue of restoring trust between government and ‘the people’ and a transformation of the current political system – an important concern among many voters since the series of crises the previous administration founded themselves in (NOS Nieuws, 2023b). In addition, FDF has labelled BBB as ‘wandering too much’, signifying that the party is not pro-farmer enough among fears they will make concessions to be able to take part in government coalitions. One of their board members joined the electoral list of another far-right wing party, Belang van Nederland (Wissink, 2023). This fragmentation signals a sentiment that was echoed in my interviews. Several farmers noted that “*political parties are not going to solve this [the precarity farmers are in]*”, “*BBB is still part of the establishment*” and “*Brussels has the real power*” (pc, 2023). While some participants were more hesitant, noting it was too early to really know if the BBB will make a difference, part of the farmers in my research noted that the farmers’ protests really had made no difference in the end, only a “*stay of execution*”. Or a continued delay of much-needed changes within the agricultural system, as perceived by others.

As seen in examples across history and regions, populism expresses itself as a current and episodic expression of the crises of capital (Borras, 2020). It is therefore even more important to pay attention to the winners and losers of these political strategies rather than the potential successes or failures of populism itself. Borras (2020) describes the objective alliance between right-wing and rural populism, where the interests of rural populism and right-wing parties (partially) overlap. However:

the danger will come if and when this objective alliance evolves into a subjective alliance, that is, the conscious construction of an organized coalition of forces and actions. If this were to happen, with disgruntled rural populations voting en masse for right-wing candidates, the forces of reaction could gain much ground and political momentum. (p. 8)

Not only has The Netherlands witnessed a subjective alliance between right-wing parties and a rural, agrarian base, this coalition is also heavily influenced by the agenda and interest of the agro-

industry, which a key role in nearly all events and organisations described in this thesis. This exemplifies the need for an analysis of these forces and their social, economic and political drivers, as well as a serious intensification of the counter-hegemonic struggle. Without doing so, political gains and electoral consequences will only further postpone an alternative to capitalism and its the continuing crises.

## 5 ‘We need farmers. Period. But not this system.’: Where to Now?

*“The current industrial agriculture system is breaking apart; the question is now what will emerge from the cracks?” (CSA farmer, pc, 2023)*

The question this research set out to answer how and with what outcome the farmers, agro-industry, and electoral politics have shaped a protest coalition in response to the government’s nitrogen reduction proposals. In the context of an abandoned countryside, and despite the fact that farmers are increasingly under pressure from the capitalist (agricultural) system, the farmers’ protest called mostly for a continuation of this very system. By integrating the historic development of the Dutch countryside and its inhabitants with my own observations and qualitative interviews with various farmers, as well as research on topics such as populism, social movements, cultural hegemony and class, this thesis shows how the agro-industry has aided the creation of a multi-class protest coalition which, rather than demanding systemic change, upholds the status quo. It explains how many farmers are simultaneously exploited by and dependent on the industry, analyses the mechanisms through which agro-industry shapes rural-agricultural thought and culture, and shows how the BBB brought both together under the umbrella of a regressive populist party.

The development of capitalism has given rise to a complex class make-up of agrarian society which features not just the exploiters and exploited, but a large section of petty bourgeois farmers who might own their farms, but often profit very little from its production. Analyzing different modes of farming – more entrepreneurial or peasant-like – might help to identify those farmers who are more likely to operate independently from capital: economically, but also politically. This research demonstrates that to understand the emergence of a multi-class farmers coalition necessarily means addressing both the farmers’ class position and its relation to (or intertwinement with) the agro-industry, as well as their social and geographic context.

The industry's cultural hegemony is a key factor in explaining the political orientation and success of the farmers’ protests and its electoral consequences. Through extensive narrative construction with the use of media, education and research, and the shaping of farmers philosophy and social networks, the agro-industry, and the reality of life under capitalism, has aided the justification and rationalization of the current agricultural system, where differences among farmers and contradictions with industry are largely disregarded in favor of a unified protest coalition. By mobilizing on populist sentiments and topics such as the abandonment of the countryside, the undervaluation of farmers by government and society at large, the unfair and unequal treatment of farmers when it came to (nitrogen) pollution, a right-wing populist party secured a position in parliament. In the end, the interests of agro-capital and capitalist farmers are served at the cost of the interests of not only more peasant-like farmers, but the future of a sustainable and fair planet. The Dutch case shows what happens when farmers are weaponized against sustainable food-system transitions by those actors which benefit mostly from the status quo. At the same time, the farmers protests’ serve as an example of the increasing pressures and tensions that emerge from the current globalized food system in relation to climate change, ecosystems destruction and exploitation resulting in peasant struggles and, more broadly, resistance against capitalism.

From the tentative conclusion above, the question remains: what will an alternative struggle, countering and breaking the current alliance and building towards a future of food sovereignty, look like? Both to round off this thesis and to offer a starting point for further research, we will shortly introduce the possibilities.

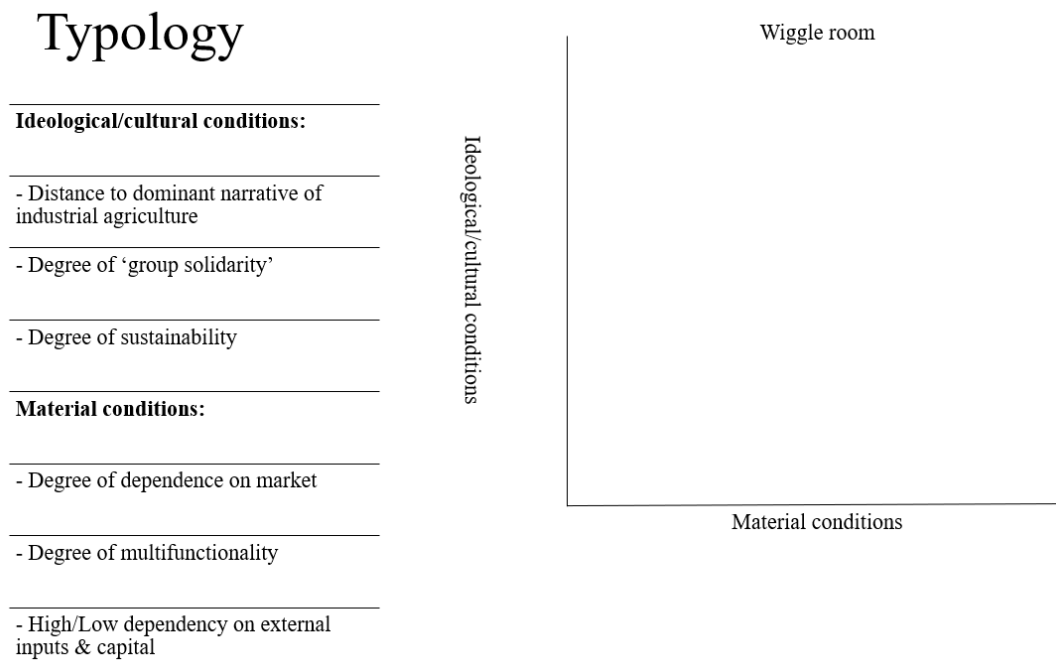
As argued, many farmers occupy a complicated class position with strong ties to agro-industry. The bottom line is, however, that while a large section of farmers, does not sell their labour-power, their labour is essentially exploited through the market. This exploitation, and the rural misery resulting from capitalist hegemony, offers a powerful starting point to unite farmers in a counter-hegemonic struggle.

An important starting point is the existing initiatives and movements, albeit relatively small, to understand their successes and failures. The current landscape consists of a variety of groups and organizations, fragmented in terms of tactics, strategy and ideology which hinders coordination and movement building. This is visible in the Groenboerenplan. Within the coalition those farmers with a higher dependency on the agro-industry and with larger financial interests ended up setting the boundaries for the plan, at the cost of more radical farmers who were less reliant on the current system. Disagreements on how strongly the proposed plan should reject or renounce conventional agriculture boiled down to the fear of breaking the united front with other farmers and creating polarization and antagonism. Other challenges in the movement is that groups such as BioNext (organic farmers) or VoedselAnders have trouble mobilizing farmers on issues that are not 'close to home', such as trade agreements and protection of sectoral interests (such as the organic market). For example, some farmers view more sustainable farming practices not as a solution to the future of their farm/farming at large, but more as a niche market and an interesting economic opportunity (pc, 2023).

With my data set and the writings by van der Ploeg on new peasants and differentiation (2018a; 2018b) a typology (fig. 3) has been created which centres around the question "where does the agro-industry stop, and the farmer start?" To build alliances and coalitions between rural-urban movements, untangling the 'marriage' of farmers and the agro-industry is essential. If the involvement of the agro-industry so heavily influences the formation, potential, and success of a regressive populist movements, then are farmers who are less involved with or dependent on the agro-industry easier to mobilize for a progressive alternative? What characterizes a farmer who is less dependent on the agro-industry? These questions serve as a departure point for future research, where the typology can be expanded upon.



**Figure 3** A conceptual typology on the cultural and material conditions that shape farmers' wiggle room



*Source:* This author

The typology is constructed on two sets of conditions which have been defined through analysis of conversations with farmers, movement organizers, and scholars. The vertical axis reflects the ideological and cultural conditions, and the horizontal axis shows the material conditions, which give rise to the position in which a farmer finds themselves and the 'wiggle room' this farmer has. 'Wiggle room' refers to the receptivity a farmer has to class consciousness and to the narratives and strategy of a progressive movement. The markers which define this 'wiggle room' have been selected based on the analysis in this research, such as some of the characteristics that marked the biggest differences among my participants.

*Distance to the dominant narrative of industrial agriculture*

The extent to which farmers subscribe to the dominant narratives concerning the necessity and role of industrial agriculture for the persistence of a functioning food system. This includes their education, access to diverse and unbiased research, the media sources they consume, and how critically they reflect on common narratives produced by and for the industrial agricultural food system.

*Degree of 'group solidarity'*

The extent to which the social environment of the farmer reinforces the dominant view and narrative on industrial agriculture. This is influenced by familiar ties to farming, the distance and interaction with 'the urban' and to what extent the social make up of their life is shaped by the agro-industry, for example by having friends and colleagues who reproduce and represent the dominant narrative on industrial agriculture (For an extensive analysis on group solidarity see de Rooij et al., 2010).

### *Degree of sustainability*

The biggest divide on an ideological and at times material level seems to exist between farmers who have chosen a different farming practice, for example organic or biodynamic rather than conventional. Sustainability does not mean per definition that the farmer is more progressive, let alone anti-capitalist, but it is often linked to a distance from dominant agro-industrial narratives and reactionary group solidarity.

### *Degree of dependency on market*

The extent to which the farmer is embedded in the globalized food system and its markets, or has been able to construct alternative channels for selling their goods such as through direct sales on their farm, at farmer's markets, through CSA's etc. This material condition determines their ability to move away from the dominant agro-industrial system.<sup>12</sup>

### *Degree of multifunctionality*

To what extent a farmer has a farm which is constructed around multifunctionality such as a mixed-farm, great diversity in arable crops, or a function of agro-tourism etc. This determines their flexibility to move away from the agro-industrial system and can protect them more from (small) market shocks, resulting in less extreme fluctuations in income and expenses.

### *High/low dependency on external inputs & capital*

This determines the material relationship to the agroindustry, being less dependent on external inputs such as artificial fertilizer and agro-chemicals or loans and credit. This leads to a higher degree of self-sufficiency and a closed cycle farming system, creating less dependency on and more distance to the agro-industrial system and its markets.

With this typology as a starting point, the pathways towards food sovereignty could be further explored, aiming to bring a large section of farmers together in the counter-hegemonic struggle. Several of the farmers I talked to described the protests as an expression of irreconcilable contradictions of the highly industrialized, globalized food system. What remains to be seen is whether a progressive movement will be able to overcome it. In this regard, the words of one farmer ring true: *'One point I agree on when it comes to the protests is that yes, we need farmers. Period. But not this system'* (pc, 2023).

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<sup>12</sup> There are various ways in which this dependency, or the degree of autonomy, changes. This can be shaped by (economic) relations with other farmers, such as starting cooperations for production and packaging processes or to negotiate better prices.

# Appendix A: Interview guide

## Interview guide #1: Farmers

1. *Motivation to become a farmer / be a farmer.*
  - a. *When did you start farming? Why did you decide to be a farmer? Have these reasons/has this motivation changed over time?*
2. *Which changes have occurred/ have you witnessed on your farm since you started farming?*
  - a. *Changes in agricultural methods, expansion, (economic) diversification, biodiversity, weather circumstances etc.*
3. *Which changes have occurred in your immediate surroundings/ local area?*
  - a. *Change in number of farmers, biodiversity, local policy, national policy, collaboration with farmers in your area, interaction with city/ villagers/ consumers.*
4. *What will you need to ensure that this farm can still exist in approximately 20 years?*
  - a. *What are necessary changes you envision? Challenges? What do you need to overcome these?*
  - b. *What is going well/ensuring your future stability?*
5. *How were you involved with the farmers' protest?*
  - a. *If involved, to what capacity? Why? Why then?*
  - b. *If not involved, why not? What did you do instead?*
6. *What have the farmers' protests resulted in in your opinion?*
  - a. *What has changed?*
    - i. *On a political level*
    - ii. *On a local level*
    - iii. *In your relation to other farmers*
    - iv. *In your relation to other inhabitants in your local area*
7. *By whom do you feel best represented at this moment?*
  - a. *If a specific person/organization is named; why?*
  - b. *If none is named; why not?*
    - i. *What should this person/organization mostly advocate/work for?*
8. *What is the relationship with other farmers around you?*
  - a. *Has this changed since the farmers' protests? Why/Why not?*

## Optional points of conversation:

- *Views on alternative movement/initiative during farmers' protest: Groenboerenplan*
  - *Interview guide #2: Representatives of Grassroots organizations/National/International organizations*
1. *Where your members/ those you represent/ those in your network involved with the farmers' protests?*
    - a. *If so, in what capacity? Why? What about the farmers' protests appealed your members/ those you represent?*
      - i. *Can you say something about the type of farmer that was involved with the protests? (Size of farmer, type of farmer, location etc.)*
    - b. *If not, why not? Where they active in a different way? How? Why?*
  2. *Has there been a change among your members/ those you represent since the farmers' protests?*
    - a. *In the numbers/ has your organization grown?*
    - b. *The motivation of the members/ those you represent?*
    - c. *Their demands?*
    - d. *Their expectations of the organization/group that represents them?*
  3. *Which changes are visible over the past years among your members/ those you represent and how is that reflected in the work your organization does?*
  4. *Which topics do your members see as a priority?*
    - a. *Why?*
    - b. *On which topics do members disagree?*

- c. *Why?*
- 5. *What other key players do you identify within the political field of agricultural representation?*
  - a. *What is your relationship with these groups?*
  - b. *Where do you find common ground? Where do you differ?*

*Optional:*

- 6. *Where do you see potential for progressive change among farmers? How would you define progressive? What are uniting factors among farmers? What do farmers need to be able to change towards a (more) progressive form of agricultural production?*

## Appendix B: Methods

**Table 3** Categories used to select and characterize research participants

<b>Degree of involvement in the farmers protests</b>	<b>Mode of farming</b>	<b>Type of farmer</b>
Participant	Dairy/livestock	Industrial/non-alternative/conventional
Sympathising	Fruit	Alternative (organic, bio-dynamic, agro-ecological etc.)
Ex-participant	Poultry	
Non-participant	Arable / crop	
	Mixed	

*Note:* Three categories used to ensure a diverse sampling size among the research participants. The criteria chosen ensured that (1) the views and positions of farmers who organised or participated in the protests, and those of farmers explicitly outside of the protests, were included in this research; (2) the diversity in modes of farming among farmers is accounted for in the research, especially because the farmers' protests against the nitrogen policies primarily concerned dairy farmers who therefore were expected to have a different perspective and position within the coalition and motivation towards the protests than other farmers; and (3) different types of farmers were distinguished based on the expectation that there were considerable differences in motivation and ideology depending on the level of industrial vs alternative farming practices.

## Appendix C: Data analysis

Interview number	Type of farming	Involvement in protest	Size farm (land and/or animals)	History farm	Labour	Development since starting farm
#1	Organic dairy farmer	participated in the legal/official demonstrations in The Hague	60 ha, ownership + tenancy; 100 cows	Moved to region in '91; generational farm;	Additional hired in labour for milking of cows a few times a week and when land work needs to be done	Expansion of herd and land first 10 years, continuous pressure of growth; switch to organic production
#2	Organic arable farmer	sympathising with the protests, active as representative and spokesperson of the organic sector on a national level	210 ha, ownership	Moved away from family dairy farm in '81, started vegetable farm in cooperation with province in '89;	Permanent hired-in labour as well as dependency on seasonal workers	Set up own processing, storage, and packaging factory on farm for own produce and that of farmers in region
#3	Bio dynamic arable farmer	non-participant	77 ha, ownership + tenancy	Family farm, founded shortly after second world war; '90's farm was converted to organic; now bio-dynamic.	2 partners in the farm, permanent hired-in labour as well as dependency on seasonal workers	Set up cooperative with other farmers and factory to do own processing, packaging, and storage to create shorter produce-chains; move towards more extensive farming
#4	CSA gardener, non-participant	active in alternative farmers movement, spokesperson and representative of CSA farmers and federation of agro-ecological farmers on a local and national level	1.9 ha, ownership but desire to common the ground	1 <sup>st</sup> generation farmer; Started CSA in 2014 + food cooperative; co-founded CSA network and Agro ecological federation	1 gardener + 1 hired in labour + volunteer labour	
#5	Former-farmer (conventional and organic)	non-participant, representative and spokesperson of Toekomstboeren and LVC on a local, national, and international level	-	Family of farmers; converted farm to organic in '98	-	-

#6	Conventional arable farmer, switching to regenerative farming	non-participant	100 ha, ownership & tenancy	Generational farmer; continuous expansion of farm since 1950's (from 18 ha to 100); 2020 decision to switch to regenerative, less extensive farming	1 farmer, occasional hired in labour but mostly solitary	Desire to step away from need for continuous growth and wanting a better perspective for the future of the farm, decision to move to regenerative farming
#7	Fruit-tree farmer, conventional but nature inclusive	participant, active in local group Boerenverstand (separated from Agractie Flevoland). Supermarket blockades.	n/a, ownership	Generational farmer	1 farmer + permanently hired in labour + seasonal labour	Expansion to production market in Poland, international trade
#8	Conventional, arable farmer	participant in the legal/official demonstrations in The Hague	170 ha, ownership, and tenancy	Generational farmer; working in farm for 8 years	Family (3 members) + owner contracting firm	Continuous growth and mechanization
#9	Non-farmer	spokesperson and representative of a broad group of farmers on topics of (international) trade agreements	-	-	-	-
#10	Non-farmer	representative and spokesperson of Bio-dynamic farmers, active in alternative farmers movement.	-	-	-	-
#11	Conventional dairy farmer	participant (Agractie)	110 cows,	Generational farmer;	3 families + some interns and hired-in labour on busy days	Growth to 110 cows
#12	Organic & conventional poultry farmer	participant	3500 chickens	Generational farmer; started up new farm by himself	n/a	Continuous expansion and growth since start farm (2019)
#13	Conventional dairy farmer	participant (supermarket blockades)	800 cows, 500 hectares land	Generational farming; moved with family to new area; took over parent's farm	2 families + permanently hired in labour + occasional contractual labourers	Growth from 200 cows to 800, growth land from 100 ha to 500 over past decades.

#14	Non-farmer	representative of Toekomstboeren and LVC at an international level. Researcher in social rural movements.	-	-	-	-
#15	CSA farmer	non-participant, involved in alternative movement.	1-2 ha, tenancy	1 <sup>st</sup> generation, started garden in 2014	2 gardeners + occasional volunteer help	Creation of CSA network in local town, set up local/short-chain food supply chain
#16	Former-Conventional arable farmer	representative of agrarian union Netherlands (where part of LVC in the past), participant in first protests, union distanced themselves after protests hardened and FDF made extreme-right wing statements.	n/a	Generational farmer, moved to new area in '69 to take over farm in-laws	Family	-
#17	Organic dairy farmer	actively threatened by farm closure with current nitrogen policies, non-participant.	100 cows, 80 ha	Generational farmer, recently acquired second farm; '91 converted to organic	2 families + hired in labour + volunteers/interns	Specialization in nature cheese (free of plastics) + development farm shop
#18	Conventional poultry farmer	local politician, non-participant but active in organising/sympathizing.	4000 chickens	Generational farmer, switch from cows/pigs/chickens to pigs/chickens, to chickens	1 family + hired in labour	Continuous expansion and technological advancements
#19	Organic dairy farmer	openly anti-farmers' protests	50 cows, 245 chickens, 5 pigs, 100 ha (tenancy), 20 ha ownership	Generational farmer, Moved to new location in '90's, organic	2 families + sometimes hired in labour	Set up farmer shop and creation of short-food supply chains, closed mineral cycle, actively reducing dependency on imports
#20	Conventional dairy farmer	non-participant	140 cows, 40 ha	1 <sup>st</sup> generation farmer; joined generational farm	3 partners in the farm + sometimes hired in labour (contractual)	More atomization, modernization barn, expansion herd.



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